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Who Cares?!
Fostering Inclusive and Empowering Environments for Black Students in
Predominantly White Institutions: Strategies for Retention and Cultural
Engagement

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Abstract

This research focuses on the critical components of caring relationships and how they relate to first-generation Black students' achievement in higher education. It will reveal how staff-led collegiate programming could benefit first-generation Black college students by allowing them to establish caring relationships and mentorships that allow them to construct a solid support system that is easily accessible to them from the moment they begin college until graduation.

Using data collected from interviews with current college students enrolled in a retention program at a PWI (Predominately White Institution) and in connection with a conceptual framework informed by theorists Nel Noddings, Vincent Tinto, Terrell Strayhorn, and Albert Bandura, we will define what caring relationships looks like, how to build these relationships in programming, and how to make the experience authentic and tailored to each student's needs. By understanding the true significance of caring relationships, their essential elements, and how they relate to the achievement of first-generation Black students in higher education, organizations are forced to put their care where their money is by implementing a core of caring relationships.

To protect the identities of all parties involved, pseudonyms were used for the university name, retention program, and participant names.

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To all those mentioned above and the countless others who have contributed to our academic pursuits, we offer our heartfelt thanks.

Dedications

In dedicating this dissertation, we extend our deepest gratitude to our families whose unwavering support has been the cornerstone of our academic journeys. Their love, encouragement, and sacrifices have fueled our determination, and for that, we are eternally grateful. To our mentors and professors, your guidance and wisdom have shaped not only this work but also our intellectual growth. Your belief in our potential has been a constant source of inspiration, pushing us to strive for excellence. This dissertation is dedicated to all those whose belief in us has illuminated the path to this moment.

B.L.A.C.K. (Building Legacy Achieving Community through Knowledge)

To our ancestors, from the shackles of oppression to the strides toward freedom, your unwavering strength and bravery has paved the way for our journey. Your strength shining through stories of sacrifice and hope, inspires us to build on the foundation you have laid. While the pursuit of justice and equity progresses, may this dissertation pay tribute to your legacy and strive to carry forth your dreams of a more inclusive, equitable, and empowered world.

To the younger generations of African Americans, may you find strength in your journey, hope in your future, and faith in this moment. As you stand on the shoulders of giants, be assured that your creativity, your vibrancy, and your determination will shape the future. Our group title, “Building Legacy, Achieving Community through Knowledge,” represents the connection between the past and the future, where education and understanding become tools for empowerment. We dedicate this work to you in the hopes that it will guide you on your journey towards realizing your fullest potential in creating a community grounded in unity, resilience, and empowerment.

For US, by US

Danielle Allen

To the guiding hands of the past, the nurturing embrace of the present, and the beckoning horizons of the future, I humbly dedicate this dissertation.

To my **parents and stepparents**, your love has been my anchor and your expectations my guiding light. Without your steadfast support, I could not have embarked on this journey.

To my beloved **grandmother**, your unwavering faith in me has been a beacon of strength. Your constant encouragement and unwavering belief propelled me beyond my limits.

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To those who will follow in my footsteps, know that you are not alone. May you find solace in the community and support that surrounds you.

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This dissertation stands as a testament to the profound impact of love, support, and guidance in shaping one's journey. To every soul whose presence has shaped my path, and has contributed to my growth and success, I extend my deepest gratitude. As I step forward into the future, may the lessons learned, and the relationships forged continue to illuminate my path and inspire those who follow.

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Kelly Atkins

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I am fearless because you are.

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I am #LovingMe #GettingStronger

I dedicate this work to you all.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Nearly 1 in 3 college students (30%) are first-generation students of color (FGSOC), possessing the intersectional identity of being both a first-generation college student and a racial minority (Schuyler et al., 2021). First-generation Black¹ college students graduate from high school and attend college to graduate with a degree in four years, assuming that the college experience will be similar to their non-person of color (POC) counterparts, or how it is in the movies: the fun, the studying, and the partying. However, the rude awakening soon arises when first-generation Black students face adversity with little or no support from caring staff.

This challenge is particularly true for first-generation Black students at PWIs (Predominantly White Institutions). There needs to be more representation of themselves on these campuses. Navigating the collegiate experience, especially as the first person in their family to attend a postsecondary institution, is a frightening reality when no one can offer assistance when the weight of it all becomes overwhelming.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in Fall 2010 was highest for Asian students at 74%, followed by White students at 64%, students of two or more races at 60%, Hispanic students at 54%, Pacific Islander students at 51%, and Black students

¹ Throughout this dissertation, the word Black is capitalized when used in reference to Black groups, organizations, people, and culture. According to Dumas (2016), "Black is understood as a self-determined name of a racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships (pp. 12-13)."

trailing behind at 40% (NCES, 2019). Consequently, Black students fall behind. In addition, the lack of motivation and support that Black students receive is evident in the numbers. The goal is to increase the care, how students are supported, and allow students to connect with the right people on their campuses to improve their engagement, perseverance, and grit.

This study expands the efforts of increasing Black first-generation college student graduation rates through the lens of care by implementing practices that exclusively place Black first-generation college students at the center. It is about creating an intentional space for students to find the right people to matriculate through each year to the stage at graduation.

Background of the Problem

College allows students to enhance their perspective of the world by broadening their areas of knowledge. Still, it exposes students to more social experiences and increased opportunities, leading to upward economic mobility after graduation. It is essential to bring attention to first-generation Black college student success. First-generation Black college students come into college with a myriad of challenges. These challenges include imposter syndrome, financial difficulties, family support, college preparedness, racial discrimination, and marginalization. Coupled with a first-year college experience and the expectation to complete classes and acquire the necessary resources to succeed, a student may feel unsupported and lost. On average, students from minority backgrounds, immigrant origins, and economically disadvantaged families leave school earlier, receive fewer degrees and certificates, and exhibit lower academic skills than their more privileged peers (Gamoran, 2001). To address these inequalities, we need

research that identifies effective responses to the challenges that give rise to unequal opportunities and outcomes (Gamoran, 2015).

These disparities are hard to ignore; therefore, collegiate programming must take a targeted approach to the challenges that first-generation Black college students encounter. Black first-generation college students must feel supported and seen to be retained in college and graduate with a degree. In addition to the support of theorists Nel Noddings, Vincent Tinto, Terrell Strayhorn, and Albert Bandura, this study will focus on an existing program that aims to positively highlight the significance of care on Black student retention and persistence.

Research shows that strategies based on creating a caring culture can potentially increase Black student retention. Therefore, we expect to examine the relationship between caring practices and Black student success in higher education, explicitly identifying the practices and programs grounded in a culture of care.

Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspective

First-generation Black college students are the first in their family to attend college, with neither parent having attended college or earning a college degree. Unfortunately, while the enrollment of first-generation students who enter college has increased, first-generation students are four times more likely than their peers to drop out following their first year of college (Shelbe et al., 2019). To enhance retention among first-generation Black college students, researchers investigated the hurdles they face while pursuing a degree and approaches that can help them succeed through matriculation. Academic expectations, motivation and support, and a sense of belonging are essential.

First-generation Black college students typically develop their sense of identity and belonging during their first college years. A sense of belonging is described as a student feeling at home in a higher education institution, fitting in well within the environment, being a member of more than one community, and feeling supported by faculty and staff (Dias, 2022).

Feeling accepted and integrated into the collegiate culture encourages first-generation, low-income students' sense of belonging. Therefore, first-generation Black college students must be physically and psychologically present in their surroundings as they transition through college. Higher education institutions that establish student-centered programs for this group foster a caring environment where students can prosper academically. Research shows a link between students' sense of belonging and their achievement and retention rates in higher education. Ahn and Davis (2020) assert that the organization of institutional policies for student participation in social activities should have high regard for those students who have difficulties due to their socioeconomic status. These policies help foster and integrate a culture of care and support for first-generation students.

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)

A predominantly white institution (PWI) refers to an educational institution, such as a college or university, where most of the student body and faculty members are predominantly Caucasian or white ethnicity. These institutions often reflect historical patterns of racial demographics, where white individuals traditionally constitute the majority. The term is commonly used in discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion within higher education, highlighting the need for increased representation and

opportunities for individuals from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Efforts to address the challenges associated with PWIs often involve initiatives that hope to foster a more diverse and inclusive environment, recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives and experiences in the educational setting. Throughout this study, the team will use “Predominantly White Institution” or “PWI” to define the university the sample population attends and where programming exists to increase student retention rates.

Culture of Care

Culture of care is defined by the research team as schools, environments, and individuals being cognizant of creating a brave space for students to feel seen, valued, and heard to encourage students to positively contribute, feel safe, and ignite curiosity in their studies, ultimately leading them to graduation.

Through this study, the team identifies the importance of how caring cultures encourage student success and overall morale for their post-secondary experience.

The Triumph Initiative Program

The Triumph Initiative—situated on a mid-western Predominantly White Institution (PWI) campus—is a retention program that encourages students through their undergraduate journey and enables them to utilize all their resources. Using an academic coaching model, the program provides the blueprint for student success through tutoring, mentoring, and activities that actively support the students who necessitate programming that fuels their motivation to reach their full potential. The Triumph Initiative offers first-year students academic and professional support by providing student advising, coordinating educational programs, making resources available, and organizing humanities programming such as public thinking events and online reading groups.

The Triumph Initiative creates a caring relationship between advisors and students, and it encourages students to foster a positive and healthy relationship with school resources that connects them to the academic, cultural, and social supports imperative to increasing student persistence and retention.

Background of Study

Teachers, professors, advisors, counselors, Deans, and President's influence students' educational experiences and academic trajectories. These practitioners can make the most significant impact on a student's educational experience. Numerous studies validate the accepted view that a student's likelihood of short-term and long-term academic success correlates to the quality of their instructors, the relationships established throughout their educational experiences, and the culture of care created by those educators (Hattie, 2012). "A good instructor can add as much as one and a half years of learning in one academic year, whereas a poor-quality instructor can set a student back months" (Croft, et al., 2018, p.1). Caring persons are critical to all students, particularly those who face academic, social, and personal challenges, which is the case for many Black students.

Educators genuinely care for students, particularly when they want them to thrive and succeed. Care manifests when teachers establish caring relationships with students. This high-impact practice results in significant academic gains and social-emotional development in K-16 students (Hattie, 2012). In his research, John Hattie (2012) purports that as much as one year of academic growth occurs for students who experience teachers who build caring relationships.

Review of Literature

This study will identify practices and environments grounded in care and determine if they significantly influence first-generation Black college students to persist and complete their degree programs, particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The research team defines a culture of care as a warm, welcoming environment in which students feel connected, valued, and affirmed. It is a setting where the care, compassion, and support offered by various community members are deliberate, heartfelt, and genuine. The caring culture gives students the tools and resources to succeed in their collegiate and professional endeavors. The research team theorizes that there is a strong relationship between a consistent culture of care and the persistence and retention of Black students at predominately white institutions.

Care Theory

The literature indicates that many successful Black students benefit from caring relationships and environments that create a sense of belonging. Brooms (2017) defined the familial, compassionate, and encouraging relationships between students and staff as “othermothering” and “otherfathering”. As a research team, we will examine Nel Noddings’ care theory as the foundational scholarly work on the concept of care.

Noddings posits that caring is an act that is part of the human moral foundation (Yokota & Douglass, 2019) and that the act of caring is multi-dimensional and embodied in various phases (Noddings, 2013). Noddings referred to natural care as the initial feelings one experiences for something or someone out of mere awareness that something or someone exists. She further defined the “one-caring” as the person who feels and responds to a sense of obligation, and the “cared-for” is the recipient. The relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for is co-dependent. A person may care about

something only in thought or choose to act upon their care, but caring can only happen if there are both entities (Noddings, 2013). Noddings (2013) further states that caring transitions from natural to ethical care when one cares because it is natural and part of their aspirational ethical makeup. Noddings defines “displacement” as a mindset that arises in caring when the “one-caring” exchanges personal interest for the interest and need of the “cared-for.” Noddings describes the “one-caring” as someone who experiences myriad emotions for the “cared-for,” such as concern, worry, conflict, anguish, anger, happiness, empathy, and acceptance. The “one-caring” listens and is engrossed in the life and concerns of the “cared-for,” sometimes acting out of their expectations. Inevitably, according to Noddings, the “cared-for” must recognize and accept the caring acts; otherwise, the caring does not exist.

Noddings (2013) refers to the apparent act of caring as modeling. For example, a college advisor may check on a student who feels overwhelmed by academic responsibilities after business hours. In this example, the advisor exemplifies what it means to care; consequently, the student learns how to give care from the advisor’s actions. This exchange creates a cycle that transfers the act of caring to the cared-for, and the cycle perpetuates.

Glowacki-Dudka, Mullett, et. al (2018) examines Noddings’ theory in educational settings, citing Nodding’s belief that persons who are intricate in the education of students must be attentive and receptive. They must listen, respond to the student’s expressed and inferred needs, and demonstrate intentional care. According to Cervoni, McKamey, and Bernard (2020), the teacher who strives to establish caring relationships with students must acknowledge the importance of care from the student’s perspective.

As Noddings (2013) emphasized, the caring educator is intentional and responsive to the student's needs. McKamey (2011) revealed that English Language Learner (ELL) students have agency in caring relationships, and the teachers must listen to students to understand how caring functions in their lives as students.

Maloney and Matthews (2020) examined teacher care practices, specifically focusing on how teacher care impacts students' performance in a mathematics course. The study illuminated the impact of a reciprocal relationship of care between Black and Latinx students and their teachers and how students experienced a sense of connectedness that positively affected their academic performance. Maloney and Matthews (2020) identified empathetic, transactional, aesthetic, and blended care, which the teachers in the study observed. Rolon-Dow 2005, as cited in Maloney & Matthews, (2020) defined aesthetic care as being concerned with "attention to technical aspects of teaching and learning such as curricula, academic goals, and teaching strategies." According to Maloney and Matthews (2020), empathetic care is having genuine concern, affirming the student's identity, being a partner in the student's struggles, seeing the complexity of the student, and celebrating the student's strengths. Maloney and Matthews (2020) describe transactional care as not being a partner in the student's struggles, seeing the student as either motivated or not motivated and expressing perfunctory concern. Maloney and Matthews (2020) defined blended care as combining the two types of care.

According to Maloney and Matthews (2020), students who had teachers who showed empathetic care were more likely to have a sense of belonging and perceived appreciation from their teachers. They also reported feeling empowered to learn

mathematics and demonstrated self-efficacy in taking chances and making mistakes while learning mathematics.

Noddings' deep reflections on caring were the gateway to more scholars examining how caring looks, its complexities, and how models of different types of care have evolved since Noddings' initial literature. Though scholars identified care as the impetus for many supportive practices, they connected their research directly to Nodding's ethic of care. They also recognized that Nodding's original perspectives were "color-blind and from a feminist perspective" (Antrop-Gonzales & DeJesus, 2006; Rolon-Dow, 2005; Toshalis, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999 as cited in Ransom, 2020).

Ransom (2020) found that Latinx and Black students valued authentic care, characterized by being engrossed in the cultural backgrounds of the students. Ladson-Billings (2021) conceptualized that students of color needed culturally responsive teaching or caring and educators with knowledge about ethnic and cultural diversity to provide culturally responsive care. Gay (2018) referred to it as culturally responsive caring, where teachers have high expectations of their students. Bondy and Ross (2008) and Ware (2006) referred to these types of teachers as the "warm demanders" like the "othermother/otherfather" presented by Broome (2017). They give the students love and care, but they demand that the students meet the requirements of academic excellence and personal responsibility (Ransom, 2020).

Sense of Belonging

Strayhorn (2012) posits that college student's sense of belonging refers to "students" perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and

essential to the group or others on campus. Sense of belonging is a basic human need associated with positive educational outcomes, fundamentally for Black college students (Strayhorn, 2019).

Given the importance of belonging, Black students' perception and ability to identify with the college community strengthens their commitment to the institution and fosters motivation to persist. Comparatively, negative college experiences can create unfavorable effects, including decreased student sense of belonging and academic achievement—the sense of belonging correlates with college students' success. Strayhorn (2019) ascertains that some students do not succeed in college because they do not feel welcomed in the first place. Clemons (2023) illustrated that at predominately white institutions (PWIs), colleges, and universities with 50% or more students identifying as white, having a sense of belonging is the primary factor influencing Black students' retention.

Research offered by several scholars has also demonstrated that the college student's need for belonging must be satisfied before any other higher-order needs, such as knowledge and actualization, can be achieved (Strayhorn et al, 2015). While previous research suggests that all students need a sense of belonging to thrive, Black students continue to be underrepresented and have lower persistence rates, higher dropout rates, higher borrowing rates, and higher debt burdens than any other racial group (Foxx, 2021).

Murphy et al. (2020) suggested that customized social-belonging interventions that address specific barriers, obstacles, and coping mechanisms of minority and first-generation students improve their retention and overall success in college. To further explore social belonging, Foxx (2021) asserts that given the significance of having

environments that foster a sense of belonging on PWI (Predominately White Institution) campuses, educators need to explore why safe spaces are beneficial, how they contribute to a stronger sense of belonging, and how institutions can create them.

Student retention is critical for the vitality of colleges across the country. Institutional actors must understand how their interactions and student engagement influence belongingness and enrollment satisfaction (Hotchkins et al., 2021). A sense of belonging is essential to Black students' retention rates at PWIs. In essence, higher education professionals play a vital role in developing and nurturing a sense of belonging in Black students. Support services and resources can help Black students understand their path to academic success and ultimately chart their degree completion goals (Clemons, 2023). Moreover, according to Strayhorn (2019), a sense of belonging is the critical ingredient in the recipe for students' overall success.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a person's perception of their ability to complete a specific mental or physical task. It is pliant and can be augmented or diminished under certain conditions Bandura (1977). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is derived from his social learning theory (Bandura, 1971). Social Learning Theory posits that cognitive processes change human behavior by interacting with external stimuli. In short, people learn by observing people who model behaviors or actions (Bandura, 1977). People collect, internalize, and categorize their observations and use this information to determine their actions and motivations. The observer may imitate the behavior, or they may adopt what they see without ever replicating the behavior. However, their

observation has become part of cognitive data that can stimulate learning. (Bandura, 1971).

By the 1980s, Bandura's research expanded his perspectives into more significant considerations about how learning occurs. He never defined himself as a behaviorist (Bandura, 1971). Instead, he hypothesized that cognitive processes influenced people's behaviors more than outer impetuses. With further inquiries, he changed his theory to Social Cognitive Learning Theory. He believed there was a reciprocal relationship between cognitive processes and the environment, and that human behavior results from the intersection of the two entities (Green & Peil, 2009 as cited in McCormick & Martinko, 2004).

Central to Social Cognitive Learning Theory is the concept of self-regulation and self-conceptions (McCormick & Martinko, 2004), which refers to people having the ability to think about themselves and manage their thoughts, emotions, and actions. Betz (2007) added that through self-regulation, people could develop and fulfill goals and respond to their environmental conditions to achieve their goals. In addition, Betz (2007) stated that people could devise plans for attaining their goals through self-regulation and monitoring and adjusting their performance.

Bandura's antecedent to self-efficacy is the concept of outcome expectancy, defined as a person's estimate that a given behavior will lead to specific outcomes (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) posited that with the realization of the outcome expectancy, an individual could conceptualize an efficacy expectation, which is the natural progression toward believing that one can execute the behavior required to produce the outcome. Bandura's research revealed that a low outcome expectancy would

almost certainly result in a person not believing he can perform the required behaviors. Doubt in personal mastery will decelerate task initiation and extinguish the chance to develop coping behaviors (Bandura, 1977).

A person with a high outcome expectancy is more likely to internalize that their mastery can produce the desired result, thus increasing the likelihood of the person initiating the task. Bandura (1977) theorized that a person with high self-efficacy might willingly attempt difficult and threatening tasks confidently, and they will achieve the desired outcome. Moreover, self-doubt will overburden people with low self-efficacy. When they encounter arduous situations or make mistakes, they will not view situations as opportunities to learn and regroup but as indicators that they cannot successfully do the task and, therefore, abandon it. (McCormick & Martinko, 2004).

In their research on leadership development, McCormick and Martinko (2004) asserted that people develop self-regulation skills by working through challenging tasks and decisions. They further emphasized that high self-efficacy is a critical trait for effective leaders.

Bandura (1977) outlined the factors contributing to a person developing self-efficacy. He stated that people learn by receiving information through observation. Specifically, they learn by viewing behaviors, actions, attitudes, and phenomena. He hypothesized that the person viewed would have varying degrees of impact on the observer, depending on their significance level. Bandura stated that an exemplar is someone whom the observer admires or has a level of respect for them, and these persons are more likely to influence the observer's behavior. This concept is known as model

status (Bandura, 1971, pp. 18-19). People acquire new behavior patterns by watching modeled behaviors or actions.

According to (Bandura, 1977, p. 195), people develop efficacy expectations through the following modes:

1. Performance accomplishments: Participant modeling, performance sensitization, performance exposure, self-instructed performance.
2. Vicarious experience: Live modeling, symbolic modeling
3. Verbal persuasion: Suggestion, exhortation, self-instruction, interpretive treatments
4. Emotional arousal: Attribution, relaxation, biofeedback, symbolic desensitization symbolic.

As individuals perform specific tasks successfully, they accumulate repeated successes, which Bandura (1977) defines as performance accomplishments. A person may achieve successful outcomes by watching and doing what the exemplar does. They learn from the exemplar's challenges and failures. Eventually, the observer will not be debilitated by self-doubt and anxiety from the impact of occasional failures. They will use the threats as opportunities to work through harsh circumstances. The observer increases self-efficacy in those specific tasks. However, they are more likely to transfer the enhanced self-efficacy to other situations (Bandura et al., Adams & Beyer, in press; Bandura et al., 1975 as cited in Bandura, 1977). Vicarious experience manifests by seeing others perform challenging activities without adverse consequences. The observer adopts the mindset that they will improve and complete the task if they increase their efficacy expectation and persist. They are encouraged by what the exemplar did to overcome the threats and

accept the attitude that “if they can do it, then so can I.” (Bandura, 1977, p.197). A person with credibility influences a person to change his behavior with verbal persuasion more effectively than someone who does not have status or credibility (Bandura, 1977). Provisional aids, according to Bandura 1977, are specific support and direction on achieving the desired outcome.

Emotional arousal is the mental and physical response that a person experiences when they encounter threatening and non-threatening situations (Bandura, 1977). The arousals are sources of information to help the person respond. However, too much arousal can overwhelm the person, and they may become laden with fear of not being able to achieve the desired outcome and they could fail. On the other hand, arousal could activate the memory of a person who has practical coping skills. They could learn from that person’s coping skills and use failure as an opportunity to learn what to do differently.

The emotional arousal phase is critical in developing self-efficacy as it is an opportunity to acquire the behavioral means for controlling potential threats and attenuate fear arousal (Averill, 1971; Notterman et al., 1952; Szpiller & Epstein, 1976 as cited in Bandura, 1977).

In a microanalysis to examine self-efficacy and behavioral change, Bandura (1977) found that the results were consistent with social learning analysis. Participants who experienced performance accomplishments exhibited higher efficacy expectations and were more apt to generalize high self-efficacy. The participants in the study predicted their success in attaining specific tasks. In all conditions, participants with higher efficacy expectations completed their tasks successfully. Moreover, participants who observed an

exemplar successfully performed all behaviors in treatment according to post-test results. Participants who had repeated observations of successful performances experienced increased self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). This study also indicated that when efficacious people face demanding situations, they may initially experience fear arousal but do not become debilitated. They employ their problem-solving and coping skills as they manage through the challenge and become more efficacious (Bandura, 1977). Wood et al. (2015) recognized the utility of self-efficacy as a factor in college student success. Self-efficacy directly impacts academic achievement (Abd-El-Fattah, 2005; Brown et al., 2008, as cited in Wood et al., 2015).

Wilkins (2006) interviewed six Black males who completed their degrees as a part of her dissertation research. She designed questions to help the participants identify the factors they believed to be instrumental in completing their degrees. Her findings identified three common personal traits influencing their academic progress: self-efficacy, endurance/resilience, and self-regulation. The participants' interview responses revealed explicit references to their confidence in completing college due to their intellectual capacities and tenacity. Two participants specifically talked about their experiences with academic failures and how the experiences caused them to manage adversity related to their education (Wilkins, 2006). One participant stated that he would not allow his failure to stop him and became more determined to complete his degree. Another participant referred to his father, who inspired him because he completed a college degree. The participant wanted to please his father. Several of them expressed being able to talk to professors to seek clarification and assistance in their learning (Wilkins, 2006). Wilkins (2006) findings supported the concept that self-efficacy is

essential in academic pursuits. It helped these students to manage stress and anxiety and communicate their needs to their professors. In addition, it prepared them to develop and monitor challenging academic and life goals (Brown et al., 2008, as cited in Wilkins 2006). Most importantly, the student participants identified self-efficacy as crucial to their success.

Kim and Hargrove's (2013) examination of the literature on Black male student academic success in higher education indicated that self-efficacy is a common theme for Black male students, whether attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). These students demonstrated strong self-efficacy and possessed a "prove-them-wrong" coping mechanism. Self-efficacy helped Black males at PWIs who faced consistent racism and microaggressions (Harper, 2009, as cited in Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Furthermore, Black males at HBCUs stated that their campuses are environments with rich sources of self-efficacy, and they recognized it as critical to their success. They also said their campus created the ideal atmosphere for developing self-efficacy (Flowers 2012, p. 304, as cited in Kim & Hargrove 2013).

Wood (2015) shows that higher levels of self-efficacy positively affected Black males' academic integration in the community college setting. In addition, previous studies indicated that academic integration positively affects persistence (Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood, 2012, as cited in Wood et al., 2015). Wood et al. (2015) reported on data collected from Educational Longitudinal Study (2006/2012) dataset that exclusively examined 212,703 Black male students who enrolled in public two-year colleges. The questions ascertained whether these students met with advisors and academic plans,

worked on coursework at the library, and spoke with faculty about academic matters outside class. There were questions to determine the level of self-efficacy of respondents. The researchers applied a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine if there were significant differences in self-efficacy across the responses. The results indicated that students with higher levels of self-efficacy had significantly greater levels of integration in several categories. (Wood et al., 2015, p.14).

Dortch (2016) explored the role of self-efficacy in the journey of two African American female doctoral students at a Predominantly White public research institution. The phenomenological study illuminated their challenges, the opportunities to recover from failures, the mechanisms they employed to persevere, and the benefit that one student gained from vicarious learning. The participant discovered she was empowered by witnessing the professor she admired face challenges in scholarly writing despite her expectations of mastery. The participant proclaimed that her confidence increased, knowing that if the professor could reach her desired level of mastery, she could overcome her obstacles and reach hers as well (Dortch, 2016).

Many researchers from various racial and ethnic groups dedicate their energies to researching how self-efficacy develops in their communities and environments and to find out if it is a phenomenon that has a positive impact on student academic achievement and persistence. Aguayo et al. (2011) surveyed 408 Mexican American college students to determine if socioeconomic status, generation status, enculturation, and acculturation significantly affected college self-efficacy. Prior research positively related Latino/self-efficacy to academic accomplishments (Flores et al., 2006; Gloria, et al., 2005, as cited in Aguayo et al., 2011).

The study showed that students' generation status and acculturation did affect college self-efficacy. First and second-generation students had higher self-efficacy, and students with acculturation and enculturation were more efficacious than other students. The results indicate that Mexican American students who maintain their cultural identity while learning the cultural norms of the and are unfamiliar with the unfamiliar environment develop higher efficacy expectations (Aguayo et al., 2011). This exploration into literature about self-efficacy has been overwhelmingly empowering and enlightening. Bandura's deep thinking into how the human mind interacts with its environment and formulating the concept of self-efficacy makes it one of the "big rocks" of life because it can set up a person's life and the lives of everyone significant to that person. Bandura (2002) stated that his perspective on self-efficacy was "rooted in the core belief that one has the power to produce desired effects by one's actions, otherwise one has little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties." Bandura later noted in the same paper that numerous large-scale meta-analyses converged a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches to verify that efficacy beliefs significantly affect human actions (Bandura, 2002).

Bandura (1977) described the conditions that developed self-efficacy and reflected on the power of one's environment. Who is around a person? Who are the exemplars in a person's life modeling behaviors and beliefs? Bandura (1977) stated that humans learn vicariously through observation, internalization of all messages, and assigning symbols. For example, if a person looks around his life and sees people working on completing education beyond high school and whose diligence pays off, people with successful careers and skill-based jobs, and people buying the dream home

and living in a safe community, he will believe his life can be similar. That observer has a better chance of developing high efficacy related to academics, perseverance, and goal setting. Furthermore, if that person sees countless people on television, social media, in the movies, and on the news who look like them, being the people with the power, the influence, and the money, they become efficacious naturally. Natural efficaciousness will flourish collectively amongst people who see themselves as the “successful ones.” Nevertheless, for many African Americans, that is not the case. Therefore, this “big rock” is most significant, and the need to enhance the environments around African American Pre-K-12 and postsecondary students to cultivate self-efficacy is paramount.

Retention

Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993), building on the work of previous researchers, identified both social and academic integration as probable predictors of student retention (Hagedorn, 2005). Tinto (1990) asserts that a student’s experiences after entering college have greater importance to retention than personality attributes or experiences before entry. The academic and social experiences with faculty, staff, and other students draw the student into the collegiate experience and hope to build a bond, or attachment, to the institution and education. He purports that institutions must refrain from isolation and incongruence to retain students. Tinto’s (1990) retention model emphasizes building social and intellectual communities, serving the interests and needs of the students, and educating the students. He stresses the importance that institutions focus on social and academic integration components. Tinto (1993) outlines effective retention as a lasting commitment to the well-being of the students, along with a solid commitment to the education of all students and attention to the academic and social community. It [effective

retention] puts the well-being of the students first. This student-centered focus produces a caring mentality throughout the institution's community. When the faculty and staff of the institution have genuine and consistent interactions with the students, the students are more likely to persist at the institution. Tinto posits that student persistence has this commitment to the student and the student's commitment to the institution as its basis. In his latter work, Tinto (2012) addresses that his earlier works were "not only problematic but objectionable" (pg. vii). He states that these works viewed student persistence as opposing student attrition. He surmises that the institution's actions are just as much to blame for the educational inequalities.

Although there has been work to identify a sound framework that leads institutional actions, there has yet to be success. Tinto (2012) asserts that too much investment in a disjointed list of actions produces little impact on student retention. Hence, he presents a framework for student success that includes conditions that foster student retention. This framework includes expectations, support, assessment feedback, and involvement.

Social Justice Implications

The social justice implications of such a study are far-reaching. By understanding how caring relationships are perceived and their impact on important factors like the sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and retention, educational institutions can develop more effective strategies to support Black students. This goes beyond mere academic success; it fundamentally reshapes the educational experience to be more equitable and inclusive. Furthermore, the study can potentially influence policy and practice at a broader level. Insights garnered can inform institutional policies and contribute to the national discourse

on educational equity. It can provide a blueprint for other institutions grappling with similar challenges and influence legislative and educational reform efforts. This study is a critical inquiry into the heart of social justice in the educational realm. It challenges prevailing norms, calls for systemic change, and seeks to uplift the voices and experiences of Black students in spaces where they have historically been marginalized. This research is pivotal in moving towards a more just and equitable educational landscape, one that recognizes and addresses the diverse needs of all its students.

Local Context (The Triumph Initiative Program)

First-generation Black college students deserve care and support from the moment they walk on campus. The Triumph Initiative program on the campus of Area Western College (AWC) encourages students through their journey and provides the blueprint for student success through tutoring, mentoring, and programming activities that support and motivate students to reach their full potential.

The Triumph Initiative program elevates success by offering first-year students academic and professional support. Triumph Initiative provides student advising, coordinates educational programs, makes resources available, and organizes humanities programming, such as public thinking events and online reading groups (Triumph Initiative, AWC, (n.d.).

The Triumph Initiative program is a retention program that enables students to utilize all their resources and be matched with a coach to propel academic performance. This creates a caring relationship between advisors and students. Additionally, this relationship allows students to foster a positive and healthy relationship with school

resources that connect students to academic, cultural, and social support, increasing student persistence and retention.

Statement of the Problem

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in Fall 2010 was highest for Asian students at 74%, followed by White students at 64% students of two or more races at 60%, Hispanic students at 54%, Pacific Islander students at 51%, and Black students trailing behind at 40% (NCES, 2019). Consequently, Black students fall behind. In addition, the lack of motivation and support that Black students receive is evident in the numbers. The goal is to increase the care students receive, how students are supported, and allow students to connect with the right people on their campuses to improve their engagement, perseverance, and grit.

This study expands the efforts of increasing Black first-generation college student graduation rates through the lens of care, challenging programming to implement practices that exclusively place first-generation Black college students in the core. It is about creating an intentional space for students to find the right people to drive them through each year to the stage at graduation.

Conceptual Framework

In addition to the support of theorists Nel Noddings, Vincent Tinto, Terrell Strayhorn, and Albert Bandura, this study will focus on an existing program to develop a conceptual framework that aims to positively highlight the significance of care, sense of belonging and self-efficacy on Black student retention and persistence.

Research shows that strategies based on creating a caring culture can potentially increase Black student retention. Therefore, we expect to examine the relationship between caring practices and Black student success in higher education, explicitly identifying the practices and programs grounded in a culture of care.

Research Questions

Research questions for a phenomenological study should reflect the lived experiences of the people (Groenewald, T. 2004). According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p.189), “phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved.” The research team thoughtfully crafted the research questions to gain the perspective of the students attending and participating in first-generation programming at predominantly white institutions.

RQ1: How do Black students perceive caring relationships with Higher Education professionals?

RQ2: How do caring relationships influence college persistence and retention for Black students?

While we have found much research on the experiences of first-generation Black college students navigating college, the research on programs that keep first-generation Black college students retained in college through graduation is limited. This research team used a qualitative phenomenological approach to develop a theory on why caring, thoughtful programming is essential for first-generation Black college students in predominantly white institutions.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on caring relationships as a critical component for first-generation Black students' retention and completion rates at Predominately White Institutions (PWI). The study uses the backdrop of a retention program—the Triumph Initiative—initially designed for first-generation, Pell-eligible, Black students at a mid-sized, midwestern, predominantly white university—known as AWC for this study. Though students currently enrolled in the Triumph Initiative must be first-year students who identify as Black, the participants in this study were enrolled under the initial eligibility requirements. The population size for the institution is 12,045, with 13.1% of the students identifying as Black. The study was conducted during the Fall semester. The study's scope is limited to recruiting sophomores through seniors in the Triumph Initiative program. The researchers contacted eligible participants via their university email address. The participants were required to be 18 years or older, Pell-eligible, or first-generation, and self-identify as Black to qualify for the study. The researchers recruited participants and reached the required number within approximately two months. Each participant consented to participate in a Zoom interview consisting of ten open-ended questions which provided the researchers with the participants' perception of a culture of care. The research team utilized theorists Nel Noddings, Vincent Tinto, Terrell Strayhorn, and Albert Bandura to support the conceptual framework for this study.

Delimitations in this study

This study focuses on the lived experiences of first-generation Black students at AWC—a mid-size four-year PWI—in the Triumph Initiative program. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) propose that the research problem describes the researcher's intention. However, knowing what the researcher does not intend to do is also essential. What the researcher

is not going to do is stated in the delimitations. This research was limited to college students who are at least sophomores and self-identify as a first-generation college student. Participation in the study was voluntary. Students who did not identify as Black or were not participants of the Triumph Initiative were ineligible for the study.

Employing the convenience sampling approach, the research team solely relied on the participants' willingness to participate in the study. Hence, the results of this study are limited to current Black students who are actively participating in the retention program offered by the selected University.

The findings of this study cannot be extrapolated to different types of institutions due to the unique experiences of each participant.

Summary

This study sought to highlight the importance of establishing supportive and inclusive environments for first-generation Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). It emphasizes the power of creating spaces that promote retention by being culturally inclusive, caring, and beneficial for the well-being of Black students within the PWI context. The focus is on fostering a sense of belonging and support to enhance the overall experience and success of first-generation Black college students in these educational settings. This further increases retention and graduation rates for the students and the school. The results of this study may serve multiple stakeholders such as College Administrators, Academic Coaches/Advisors, Faculty, Staff, Student Support Departments, and most importantly, the students themselves. Three more chapters follow this initial description.

Chapter I is an all-encompassing review of the literature on establishing caring practices for students in higher education. The theorists discussed in Chapter I highlight topics such as creating a sense of belonging, outlining the influence of self-efficacy, and the importance of retention. Chapter II outlines the research design, data analysis and how the study was conducted. Chapter III and IV concludes with highlighting the importance of implementing caring, inclusive program opportunities for first-generation Black college students at PWI's, additionally the research findings, limitations, and justifications will prove to be beneficial.

CHAPTER II: METHODS AND DESIGN FOR ACTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in Fall 2010 was highest for Asian students at 74%, followed by White students at 64% students of two or more races at 60%, Hispanic students at 54%, Pacific Islander students at 51%, and Black students trailing behind at 40% (NCES, 2019). Consequently, Black students fall behind. In addition, the lack of motivation and support that Black students receive is evident in the numbers. The goal is to increase the care students receive, how students are supported, and allow students to connect with the right people on their campuses to improve their engagement, perseverance, and grit.

In addition to the support of theorists Nel Noddings, Vincent Tinto, Terrell Strayhorn, and Albert Bandura, this study will focus on an existing program to develop a conceptual framework that aims to positively highlight the significance of care, sense of belonging and self-efficacy on Black student retention and persistence. Research shows that strategies based on creating a caring culture can potentially increase Black student retention. Therefore, we expect to examine the relationship between caring practices and Black student success in higher education, explicitly identifying the practices and programs grounded in a culture of care.

Research Design and Research Questions

The Design Alignment Tool (Kanyongo, 2017) provides a methodological framework to ensure coherence and alignment among critical components of a research study: the research questions, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, data

collection, and data analysis. When this tool is applied to a study exploring the experiences of Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), it can be instrumental in constructing a methodologically sound research design.

Research Questions

This study focuses on caring relationships as a critical component for first-generation Black students' retention and completion rates at Predominately White Institutions (PWI). Qualitative research encompasses several philosophical orientations and approaches (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study used qualitative research to understand the power of creating retention-benefitting, culturally inclusive, caring spaces for Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

Research questions for a phenomenological study should reflect the people's lived experiences (Groenewald, T. 2004). According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p.189), "phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved." The research team thoughtfully crafted the research questions to gain the perspective of the students attending and participating in first-generation programming at predominantly white institutions.

RQ1: How do Black students perceive caring relationships with Higher Education professionals?

RQ2: How do caring relationships influence college persistence and retention for Black students?

The research team's goal was to thoroughly examine the experiences of first-generation Black college students. The qualitative research approach captured Black students' complex and real-life experiences at PWIs, offering a greater comprehension of

their viewpoints. These research questions suggest a multidimensional exploration using the theoretical frameworks of care, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and retention. These theories provide a lens through which to understand and interpret the experiences of Black students in PWIs.

Care theory focuses on the significance of nurturing relationships in educational settings. A sense of belonging pertains to acceptance as an integral part of the academic community. Self-efficacy involves students' beliefs in their abilities to achieve academic success. Finally, retention theory addresses factors influencing students' decisions to continue their education at an institution.

Phenomenological Methodology

While we have found much research on the experiences of first-generation Black college students navigating college, the research on programs that keep first-generation Black college students retained in college through graduation is limited. This research team used a qualitative phenomenological approach to develop a theory on why caring, thoughtful programming is essential for first-generation Black college students in predominantly white institutions.

This qualitative study used phenomenological methodology, a philosophical and methodological approach that originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Often regarded as the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, introduced the method in his work "Logical Investigations" (1900-1901). He aimed to establish a rigorous science based on the description of consciousness and subjective experiences. Husserl emphasized the importance of bracketing, the suspension of preconceptions, to focus on the essence of phenomena. According to Patton (2015), by

this, “Husserl (1913) meant the “...study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses. His basic philosophical assumption was that we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (Patton, 2015, p. 116).

Phenomenology’s impact extends beyond philosophy. It shapes qualitative research methodologies and contributes to diverse fields. Its emphasis on understanding the essence of lived experiences and exploring subjective consciousness has left a legacy in studying human phenomena.

This study focused on comprehending phenomena concerning the success of first-generation Black college students and the influence of care provided by university programs focused on retention. Through coding data from the interviews and developing a theory based on the interpretation of shared experiences, this research used the experiences of each participant to understand the influence of caring relationships with students. The choice of this method aligns with the research questions and the theoretical frameworks. It provides an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and perceptions through interviews, coding, and thematic analysis.

The Research Team

The research team combined work in education settings throughout St. Louis, Mid-Missouri, and Southern Illinois. Each member holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in various fields. Prior to the study’s completion, the members completed research training and coursework. The team was then approved to conduct the study through the host University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Danielle Allen is a higher education administrator with a passion for access, retention, and completion of postsecondary education. Danielle has fifteen years of experience in roles dedicated to supporting students and facilitating their academic and professional growth, currently serving as a Director of Student Services at a mid-sized, predominately white institution. She holds a Master of Education in Adult & Higher Education-Higher Education emphasis, from the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), as well as multiple Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion certificates. With an unwavering dedication to student success, Danielle continues to contribute to the Higher Education landscape, embodying the values of inclusivity, excellence, and opportunity for all.

Kelly Atkins brings a wealth of experience and expertise to her role as Assistant Director for Student Success at a mid-size predominantly white institution. With over two decades of experience in higher education, her background in academic advising, coaching, and student services equips her well to support students in their journey towards success. Kelly's educational background in Social Work from Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville underscores her commitment to understanding and addressing the diverse needs of students. Her certification as a facili-trainer in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion further highlights her dedication to fostering an inclusive and supportive campus environment. In her current role, Kelly implements initiatives aimed at enhancing student success to support first-generation students, implementing strategies to promote retention and graduation rates, and fostering a campus culture that values diversity and inclusion.

Kuriston Dunlap is the Senior Program Coordinator for the Office of Precollegiate Student Services at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Educational Studies from Harris-Stowe State University and a Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction from The University of Kansas. Kuriston served as a College and Career Counselor at various St. Louis-area high schools before joining the Precollegiate department at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Her area of expertise focuses on working with underrepresented youth to provide them with the resources and support they need to succeed in their post-secondary education journey. Throughout her career, she has worked for various organizations, including Missouri College Advising Corps, Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools, and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). Kuriston takes pride in assisting St. Louis area youth to understand their full potential and ability to persevere through adversity. She is committed to ensuring that students and families have the necessary resources for a successful post-secondary career.

Angela Haywood-Gaskin is an elementary school principal of a large suburban district. She has been an administrator for ten years and an educator for thirty-four years. Her experience includes high school, middle school, elementary, and early childhood education as a principal and a teacher. She holds a master’s degree in education administration from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She also completed extensive graduate studies in Costa Rica, Central America. Haywood-Gaskin earned a Master of Journalism from the University of Missouri Columbia and a bachelor’s degree in political science and Spanish from the same institution.

Rhonda Lingard a highly experienced non-profit executive in the St. Louis region, has accumulated more than twenty-five years of diverse experience across higher education, operations, and corporate sectors. She earned her bachelor's degree in business administration from Harris-Stowe State University, followed by a master's degree in Adult & Higher Education-Higher Education emphasis, and a certificate in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership, both from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Motivated by a deep-rooted passion for positive change, Rhonda directs her efforts toward the non-profit sector, aiming to make a tangible impact on others' lives. Her steadfast commitment to community service and empowerment is the driving force behind her professional endeavors, inspiring those around her to pursue social justice and equity with renewed vigor.

Joel Stancer, an advocate for educational access, has a wealth of experience in guiding underserved communities. With a background in teaching and career coaching spanning over a decade in Alabama, he is now a pivotal figure in academic and student success at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Over his five-year tenure in higher education, he has served in program coordinator and instructor roles in student affairs, academic affairs, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Joel holds a Bachelor of Science in Education with a focus in Secondary Education: Language Arts from The University of Alabama and a Master of Science in Continuing Education with a focus in College Student Development from The University of West Alabama. His journey is characterized by his unyielding dedication to education, his profound impact on students from all walks of life, his unending pursuit of personal growth, and his dedication to lifelong learning and empowering future generations.

Participants

The study uses the backdrop of a retention program—the Triumph Initiative—initially designed for first-generation, Pell-eligible, Black students at a mid-sized, midwestern, predominantly white university—known as AWC for this study. Though students currently enrolled in the Triumph Initiative must be first-year students who identify as Black, the participants in this study were enrolled under the initial eligibility requirements. The population size for the institution is 12,045, with 13.1% of the students identifying as Black. The study was conducted during the Fall semester. The study’s scope is limited to recruiting volunteers who are at least sophomores in the Triumph Initiative program. The researchers contacted eligible participants via their university email address. The participants were required to be 18 years or older, Pell-eligible, or first-generation, and self-identify as Black to qualify for the study. The researchers recruited participants and reached the required number within approximately two months. Each participant consented to a Zoom interview consisting of ten open-ended questions, providing the researchers with the participant’s perception of a culture of care. The research team utilized theorists Nel Noddings, Vincent Tinto, Terrell Strayhorn, and Albert Bandura to support the conceptual framework for this study.

The target demographic for this study was students who attend a mid-sized midwestern Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and self-identify as Black. To be eligible for the study, students had to be currently enrolled in a university retention program, at least a sophomore, and able to complete a short eligibility pre-screen survey and a 45-minute Zoom interview. For this study, the research team recruited students on the PWI campus. Of the 60 students who applied to participate in the study, ten were

screened and selected based on their eligibility. The students are currently enrolled students at the PWI. Of the ten students selected, four were seniors, two were juniors, and four were sophomores at the selected University. Of the students interviewed, 20% of the students self-identified as male, and 80% of the students self-identified as female. The research team anticipated 5-15 participants for this study. Ten students were selected for the interviews. The students selected for this study were current students of the selected institution and participants of the retention program, Triumph Initiative, provided by the University.

The advisors in this program receive grade and progress reports for their students every semester and are prepared to intervene when necessary to facilitate better-quality coursework and class participation. Additionally, the staff will help the students select and pursue a major that best suits their interests and skills. While the retention program is open to all first-generation students eligible for the Federal Pell Grant, the research team sought to identify the benefits of first-generation Black college students and the relation of beneficial programming to their success. The students selected from this program to participate in this phenomenological study are coherently aligned with the theoretical frameworks, the research questions, and the methodological approach.

Data Collection and Analysis Process/Procedure

The research team used the platform Zoom to conduct and record all interviews. Each participant gave written and verbal consent to participate in the interviews. Each interview took place in a single session. The interviews were recorded and transcribed through the Zoom platform.

The research team obtained approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at the host and participating universities. Upon approval, the research team posted flyers throughout the University's campus to gain study participation. Emails were sent to current and past participants of the retention program, informing them of a research opportunity. Additionally, anyone interested in participating in the study could use the QR code on the flyer to access the pre-screening questionnaire.

The Qualtrics Survey Maker Tool was utilized to pre-screen students safely and securely, protecting their information. The team used Qualtrics to screen potential participants to ensure they met the selection criteria. Based on the responses, ten students were selected to complete the interview during the Fall semester of 2023. The following questions were presented to the students for their response:

1. What has contributed to your success and persistence in higher education thus far?
2. How do you perceive the diversity of AWC's campus culture?
3. How do you perceive "care" in relation to higher education or your experience at AWC?
4. Who do you receive care from on campus?
 - a. In what ways do your instructors provide care?
 - b. Other faculty?
 - c. Other staff?
 - d. Administration?
5. What are some things that you believe are important and/or necessary for your success in college?

6. Do you believe this school has those resources?
 - a. If so, are they accessible to you?
7. What relationships have you formed with faculty, staff, and/or administration on campus?
 - a. Outside of this program?
8. In what ways can the University or Triumph Initiative reflect a more caring culture?
9. Is there anything that you would like to discuss further?

A thematic analysis of the Zoom interviews was performed. The thematic analysis uncovers common themes, patterns, or ideas that arise during the interview process.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within a data set (see Figure 1).

To identify the common thread shared between student stories, we must pay close attention to the recurring themes that surface. Thematic analysis is highly effective for analyzing interview data in a phenomenological study focused on the experiences of Black students at PWIs. It aligns with the nature of phenomenological research by capturing the essence of lived experiences, allowing for in-depth exploration of perceptions and meanings, and ensuring that the analysis is grounded in the theoretical frameworks that support this study.

Figure 1

Six-phase Thematic Analytic process

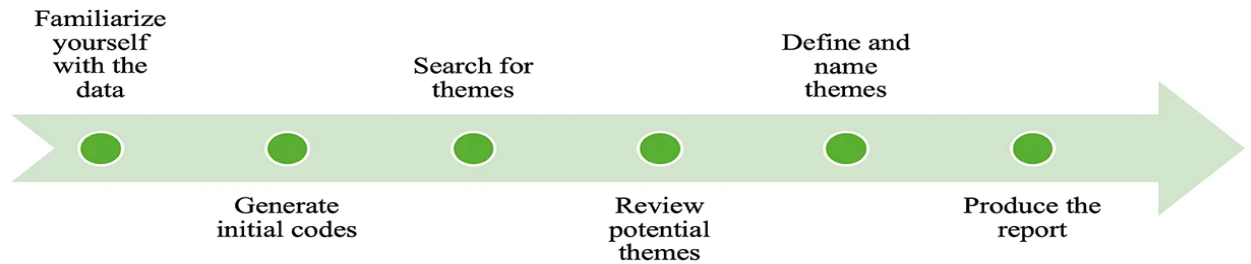


Figure 1: Six-phase Thematic Analytic process (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012)

This approach ensures that the research provides deep, meaningful insights into how Black students perceive caring relationships and how these relationships impact their persistence and retention at PWIs.

Conclusion

It is critical to monitor and evaluate the data collection process to ensure the integrity of the research process and the credibility of the findings. Careful attention should be paid to how participants are selected. Ensuring a representative sample is crucial for the validity of the findings. The structure and content of the interview questions should be consistently applied across all participants. Questions should be open-ended and flexible enough to allow participants to share their experiences fully yet specific enough to address the research questions. The protocol should be reviewed and piloted to ensure its effectiveness in eliciting relevant information. Interviewers must be adequately trained, not only in the mechanics of conducting interviews but also in sensitivity and understanding of the issues faced by Black students at PWIs. They should

be skilled in creating a comfortable and trusting environment for participants, encouraging open and honest communication. The data collection process should be uniform to ensure that the data is comparable across different participants. This includes maintaining consistency in conducting, recording, and transcribing interviews. Ethical considerations are paramount given the potentially sensitive nature of the topics discussed. This includes obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and being responsive to any distress or discomfort experienced by participants during the study. The process of coding and theme development must be rigorous and systematic. Initial codes should be generated and then organized into potential themes. These themes should be reviewed and refined in a cyclical process to ensure they accurately represent the data.

Throughout the analysis, the theoretical frameworks of care theory, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and retention should be integral in interpreting the data. This involves identifying themes related to these theories and critically examining how the data contributes to or challenges these theoretical perspectives. The researchers should engage in reflexivity, continually reflecting on their biases, assumptions, and their role in the research process. This is especially important in phenomenological research, where the researcher's perspective can significantly influence the interpretation of the data. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, it's advisable to employ member checking. This involves sharing the findings with the participants or a subset to verify that the analysis accurately reflects their experiences and perspectives. When reporting the findings, it is essential to provide a detailed account of the themes and how they relate to the research questions and theoretical frameworks. The report should also discuss the

study's limitations and the implications of the findings for practice, policy, and future research.

Using Kanyongo's Design Alignment Tool in a study examining the perceptions and experiences of Black students at PWIs offers a structured and coherent approach. It ensures that every aspect of the research is purposefully designed to address the central questions, grounded in relevant theories, and methodologically sound. This approach contributes to the academic understanding of the experiences of Black students at PWIs but also has practical implications for institutions seeking to create more inclusive and supportive environments. Therefore, the study can potentially affect policy and practice change, advancing the cause of educational equity and social justice.

CHAPTER III: ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE

Although attempts have been made to tackle the aforementioned disparities, there still exists a gap concerning the perception and experience of caring relationships between Black students and higher education professionals. This gap could significantly impact their academic journey and overall well-being. This study seeks to examine, through the lens of prominent theorists like Nel Noddings, Vincent Tinto, Terrell Strayhorn, and Albert Bandura, the nuances of these perceptions and experiences. Specifically, it aims to explore how the care extended by educators and administrators impacts the sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and, ultimately, the retention and persistence of Black students at PWIs. This study aims to illuminate the correlation between caring practices and the success of Black students in higher education. Our empirical investigation of an existing collegiate program will provide the necessary data that we will use to identify programming and practices that addresses the gaps in care, support, and motivational strategies and would actively enhancing student engagement, perseverance, and grit among Black students. The research questions central to this investigation are twofold:

RQ1: How do Black students perceive caring relationships with higher education professionals?

RQ2: How do caring relationships influence college persistence and retention for Black students?

The goal of this study is to highlight and reinforce effective practices and programs rooted in a culture of care, thereby elevating Black student experiences and

success in PWIs. This inquiry is a step towards rectifying systemic inequities and fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

A thematic analysis of the Zoom interviews was performed. Thematic analysis reveals common themes, patterns, or ideas that arise during the interview process. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within a data set. To identify the common thread shared between student stories, we paid close attention to the recurring themes that surfaced.

The research team began our data analysis process through a phenomenological lens, delineating two overarching categories stemming from the research questions: “perception of caring relationships” and “influence of caring relationships on persistence and retention.” Employing a rigorous methodological approach, the transcribed data from Zoom interviews were meticulously scrutinized, extracting pivotal sentences, phrases, and words reflective of the identified categories. Through iterative examination, these fragments were amalgamated into coherent clusters of interrelated data, forming the foundational elements for emergent themes. After iterative refinement, akin data clusters were consolidated, unveiling salient patterns and shared attributes, thus crystallizing into the major themes: sense of belonging, mentorship and guidance, and campus resources. Subthemes were meticulously assigned to each major theme, with “support” and “trust and rapport building” delineated under the sense of belonging category, while “culturally relevant mentorship” was designated as a subtheme within the mentorship and guidance domain. Despite this meticulous process, a small body of data, evincing nuanced challenges and impediments articulated by participants, remained uncategorized. This corpus encapsulated rich insights into obstacles encountered within the participant’s

narratives, thus constituting a critical component of the qualitative analysis. Hence, we termed this collection as the fourth theme, “barriers and challenges.” This study aimed to assess the perception of care for a group of Black, first-generation college students at a predominately white institution (PWI) and the influence of caring relationships for student retention and persistence at these institutions. Interview questions were designed to uncover participants’ rich experiences, challenges, and successes, using care as the theoretical framework. This chapter intends to present the narratives and perceptions of the participants, categorized into themes and subthemes.

The research team initially defined a *culture* of care as a warm, welcoming environment in which students feel connected, valued, and affirmed. It is a setting in which the care, compassion, and support offered by various community members are deliberate, heartfelt, and genuine. The following questions were asked during each structured interview:

1. What has contributed to your success and persistence in higher education thus far?
2. How do you perceive the diversity of AWC’s campus culture?
3. How do you perceive “care” in relation to higher education or your experience at AWC?
4. Who do you receive care from on campus?
 - a. In what ways do your instructors provide care?
 - b. Other faculty?
 - c. Other staff?
 - d. Administration?

5. What are some things that you believe are important and/or necessary for your success in college?
6. Do you believe this school has those resources?
 - a. If so, are they accessible to you?
7. What relationships have you formed with faculty, staff, and/or administration on campus?
 - a. Outside of this program?
8. In what ways can the University or Triumph Initiative reflect a more caring culture?
9. Is there anything that you would like to discuss further?

The third question included in the interviews addressed research question one “How do Black students perceive caring relationships with higher education professionals?” This allowed participants to narrate their perception of care through their experience. From these perspectives, care can be defined as providing individuals support, attention, and resources to ensure their well-being and success. It involved efforts that addressed student retention rates, creating a safe environment for marginalized groups, mentorship, and resources for academic and personal challenges. It also included attributes such as checking in on individuals, understanding their needs, and advocating for their success.

Introduction of Themes

Our analysis and coding process revealed three major themes addressing how caring relationships influence college persistence and retention for Black students (RQ2). These themes encapsulate critical aspects of the student experience and shed light on the

dynamics of retention and support within predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The emergence of these themes underscores the significance of fostering an environment that nurtures the holistic development and success of Black students.

Sense of belonging emerged as a fundamental theme, highlighting the importance of creating spaces in which Black students feel welcomed, valued, and affirmed within the PWI environment. Sub-themes such as institutional support, social and emotional support, and community cultivation foster a profound sense of belonging among Black students. Community cultivation involves the deliberate efforts to nurture, develop and strengthen relationships within a community (Noddings, 2013).

Mentorship and guidance emerged as pivotal components in the retention and success of Black students at PWIs. The presence of mentors who understand Black students' unique challenges and experiences can significantly impact their academic and personal growth.

Sub-themes, including trust and rapport building and culturally relevant mentorship, underscore the importance of establishing meaningful connections and relationships between students and mentors. Culturally relevant mentorship recognizes and respects the cultural backgrounds, identities, values, and experiences of both the mentor and mentee (Foxy, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Access to campus resources plays a crucial role in supporting the diverse needs of Black students at PWIs. Adequate resources, ranging from academic support services to cultural centers, contribute to the well-being and success of Black students. The availability of institutional networks and resources that support diverse populations

highlights the necessity of creating an inclusive and supportive infrastructure within the campus community.

We gain valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences of Black students as they navigate the collegiate experience in PWIs. Based on the themes that emerged during our interviews, the Black student experience of navigating PWI's is multifaceted encompassing engagement, satisfaction, and commitment. Understanding these factors and how they influence their sense of belonging, access to mentorship, and utilization of campus resources are essential steps toward creating the caring spaces that lead to retention.

Sense of Belonging

One recurring theme from the participant interviews is a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) frames sense of belonging “as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior (Strayhorn, 2019). He further explains that in college, a sense of belonging is how students on the campus perceive social support. The student’s feelings of being cared for and mattering also play a role, as do feelings of being valued and respected by staff, faculty, and peers. Thus, sense of belonging can be linked to achievement and overall well-being (Strayhorn, 2022). As previously stated, the theme of sense of belonging continuously evinced itself in the data for the participant interviews. Upon further analysis, support, trust, and rapport-building sub-themes emerged.

Support

Tinto (2012) asserts that four conditions are associated with enhanced student retention. One of those conditions is support. Within the subtheme of support, the researchers could delineate nested subthemes of institutional, social, and emotional

support. For this study, *institutional support* is defined as assistance provided by individuals employed by the institution as faculty or staff. In contrast, *social support* is defined as support provided through participation in student organizations or clubs.

Institutional Support. Participants consistently referred to various faculty and staff from whom they had received care. In one such interview, Olivia Rodgers listed four institutional employees that she feels care for her:

“Oh, absolutely. So, like I said, I work for the Veterans Center. So definitely, definitely my boss, John, hype him up and I know that I can go to Victoria.... I have a lot of support, like I have teachers that are awesome.... I have a lot of different role models who are very supportive. Just like, ‘Hey, you got this,’ or ‘You need a little encouragement.’ Like, I know I can go to Mrs. Victoria Dubois. ...just like Ms. Lisa. Within the group, I know who I can go and talk to and get support or help if I need anything. There are people I specifically [go to], ‘Hey man, I kind of need help on this,’ and they’re like, ‘Yeah I got you buddy.’ So a good support system has helped me along the way, if not literally dragged me sometimes.”

Other participants could also precisely identify at least one institutional employee who provides care as part of their support network. One student, Katherine Rieves, mentioned her connection to a faculty member (who is not employed in her area disciplinary major) and how he provides caring relationships for his students by providing insight related to navigating the campus:

“...I also have gotten to know the professor who teaches my African American literature class, and I feel like he is a really great resource, and just a good person.

His name is Tony Ferguson.... He always gives me good advice, and I feel like I can just tell him all kind of stuff. He always keeps it very real with us in our class. And he'll just be like, 'Yeah, you're first year students. This is what you kind of need to be cognizant of,' like how you like, act on campus."

One participant, Renee Mosley mentioned how janitorial staff members help to create a welcoming environment that could potentially foster a sense of belonging for students:

"If we go down to the janitors, they don't do all of that [providing resources]. They'll say, 'Hi!' or 'Good morning.' Now, that...that can change like how your day goes, or whatever.... They speak. they don't just ignore you."

It is important to note that many participants identified Black faculty or staff members as those from whom they receive care. Although some participants identified non-Black faculty and staff members who provide care, the majority made it clear that most non-Black staff, and especially faculty, do not provide care in the same way and to the extent that Black faculty and staff members do.

Social Support. Tinto (1990) asserts that the experiences that students have after they enter college are essential to their ability to feel as though they belong. These experiences and interactions with peers, staff, and faculty constitute the social support that students desire to experience a sense of belonging within the institution.

Research participant Olivia Rodgers identified a club that integrates faculty and staff members and other guests whose identities are similar to the demographics of the club's membership.

"[In] Ebony Essence... we've had a group of Black women come, and we have the...faculty and staff who are Black who represent us come and show their

support for us. [They] say [things like], ‘Hey, if you need anything, I legitimately mean you can email me.’ And like for real, it’s real! ...I need some help and email, and they’re like, ‘Oh yeah, I got you!’ It’s really refreshing.”

Another participant, Zion Campbell, identified the need for students to find their niche, or community, on campus early.

“Like caring for students, they need a support system and a community. A lot of students come to PWIs that are minorities and feel out of place. They aren’t able to excel at the academic level fully, because they’re wondering, ‘Who am I going to hang out with,’ or ‘What friends do I have?’ Or, they don’t have any type of support: anybody to lean on or guide them. So, it’s important for each college student that comes to the campus to find some type of community whether it’s big or small; and, whether it’s faculty and staff or administration or other peers, they need somebody to lean on.”

Zion also identified involvement in clubs and organizations as a way of strengthening his sense of belonging and community.

“I started off in the Afro Excellence Sisters Network and Brotherly Achieve program for Triumph Initiative. And that is where my community started. It’s kind of like a home away from home. ...It’s basically a home away from home. A family environment. They also connected me with people like Mrs. Victoria Dubois as well, an academic advisor. ...They’ve connected me with student affairs on campus, which deals with like student programs..., which, connected me with like welcome weekend and like doing tour guides and College 101,

which is a first-semester transition program for classes and helping with first-year students.”

All participants identified groups, clubs, or programs that provide opportunities for connections to peers. In doing so, many participants also highlighted that they receive care from their peers in addition to the care they receive from faculty and staff.

Participant Malika Thomas identified connection with peers as an important factor in her college success.

“I would say, safe space or like some people that theirs that look like you people that you could go to hang out with just because it is like a PWI. So, there’s not a lot of us, and just making sure it’s wholesome the group you are with and not judgmental, because you know, it changes as you navigate through college. ... Then maybe like just doing things that you like and exploring kind of what you find your joy in, and then the people that bring you joy to be able to be fulfilled throughout, like your path and going through college because it can be hard also, like by yourself, if you’re not connected with anybody.”

Another participant Katherine Rieves expressed having peer confidants as a factor of success.

“Oh, and then also having other students that you can kinda confide in and just be cool with to help you, so we can all succeed in our classes.”

Participants Renee Mosley and Jordan Miller attributed the individuals that they surrounded themselves with as a contribution to their success. Renee stated,

“I feel like what has helped me succeed and higher ed is the people that I surround myself with. So my friends, my professors and faculty. They all like have the

same mind set, or they all believe in me. So I just keep on pushing through everything with the love and support that they provide.”

Jordan expressed,

“My success in college, I would say having a reliable and understanding friend group. I feel like if I didn’t have a friend group in college, college would be so much harder to go through just because I wouldn’t really have anyone that understood me.”

Emotional Support. The theme of emotional support provides a reassuring presence, helping students to cope with the challenges of consistently adapting to the rigorous academic and social environment that college requires. Emotional support is crucial for first-generation Black college students as it helps them navigate the challenges of the college experience, promotes well-being, and contributes to their overall success and satisfaction in higher education (Schuyler et al., 2021). First-generation Black college students may lack exposure to the college environment, academic expectations, and social norms (Brooms, 2021). Institutions and support services should be attuned to their emotional needs and implement strategies and/or programs to provide effective support.

Terrell Strayhorn’s work emphasizes the transformative impact of emotional connections for student engagement and persistence, particularly for those who experience unique challenges as first-generation college students (Strayhorn, 2019). Emotional support can validate the experiences of first-generation Black college students, acknowledging the unique difficulties that they encounter during matriculation. This validation can contribute to a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation and/or imposter syndrome.

Emotional support from faculty can motivate first-generation students to actively engage in class discussions, seek help when needed, and participate in extracurricular activities. The sense of feeling supported academically enhances their overall college experience (Strayhorn, 2019). Faculty members can serve as mentors to provide guidance for first-generation students during their academic and career pursuits. Emotional support from staff is also instrumental in assisting first-generation Black college students, as it contributes to a positive and inclusive campus environment. Staff members can act as advocates for first-generation students, ensuring that their needs are considered in campus policies and practices. This advocacy shows a commitment to the success of all students, considering their holistic journey. Their support helps to create a campus environment that recognizes and addresses the unique needs of these students, ultimately fostering a positive and inclusive educational experience.

In addition to Strayhorn, Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations, aligns with the importance of emotional support for students (Bandura, 1977). When students receive encouragement and positive reinforcement, their self-efficacy increases, fostering emotional resilience and a belief in their capacity to navigate challenges.

During the interviews, participants strongly believed that emotional support was fundamental to their college success.

Several participants mentioned either programs or the support of faculty and staff in their interviews. Olivia Rodgers mentioned,

“I have a lot of support, I have teachers that are awesome, I also work in the vet center at the University, so my bosses are amazing, and very supportive. I have a

lot of different role models who are also very supportive. They say things like, hey, you got this, do you need a little encouragement? For instance, I know I can go to Victoria Dubois. So, a good support system has helped me along the way, if not literally dragged me at times.”

Participants also expressed how encouraging it was to have access to Black faculty and staff on campus when they needed emotional support. Katherine Reives mentioned how emotional support from Black students and professors validated her experiences.

“I feel like having the support of like Black professors, and also having other Black students in the same kind of programs that I’m in, helps me along the way.”

Zion Campbell exclaimed, “Oh, I love me some Triumph Initiative! I say everybody is pretty cool. The advisors are also nice people.”

Malika Thomas identified her family and a campus initiative through the Triumph Initiative which provide support:

“I get a lot of care from my family that helps me during school, and also I got a lot of care from Afro Excellence Sisters Network and Brotherly Achieve and also the faculty and staff.”

A few participants mentioned that their friends provide support through their academic journey. Renee Mosley stated that her friends “all like have the same mindset, or they all believe in me. So, I just keep on pushing through everything with the love and support that they provide.”

Jordan Miller also identified having friends as well as teachers as a reliable support.

“My success in college, I would say having a reliable and understanding friend group. I feel like if I didn’t have a friend group in college, college would be so much harder to go through just because I wouldn’t really have anyone that understood me. So, I will say that. Once again, accommodating teachers because I have been through just so many things in life. Well, honestly, it should have completely ruined me, but because professors were so unbelievably accommodating, I mean, I got who I am currently and I’m about to graduate. So I will say that.”

However, not all students have family members who can provide insights or advice on navigating higher education. Additionally, the pressure to succeed and fulfill family expectations can contribute to higher levels of stress and anxiety among first-generation students. Participant Maya Reynolds identified her father’s lack of education as the reason for pursuing her own education.

“The reason why I decided to pursue [education] was like because of my family, but, mostly because of my dad because he wasn’t able to go to higher education and had to get his education through a GED program. So, I did it for him like as well for myself as well, because I know I can like be better in life than like would what an education with some formal educational background other than like looking into like the soft, like the other, like the hard working skills of life and getting a job straight out of high school and just kind of building from the ground up. I’d much rather like have some form of like a better steppingstone and like getting a better life for myself.”

Participant Marian Williams identified her family as a support system, but also viewed their life choices as a catalyst for her success.

“I would say my family, for them, not just because of like the motivation and the money and stuff like that that they give me, but also just growing up and seeing some of their life choices, decisions, and stuff like that. Just wanting better for myself to them, you know. Like my dad, he always says you know, you don’t necessarily have to go through something to learn a lesson from it.”

Emotional support is crucial for first-generation Black college students, as it empowers them to navigate the challenges of the college experience, promotes well-being, and contributes to their overall success and satisfaction in higher education.

Trust and Rapport

The Trust and Rapport theme focused on the participant’s ability to feel heard, supported, and safe in an environment in which they can share their concerns while interacting with others in their classes or on the college campus. Trust emerged as essential when establishing and building relationships with the Black student population on the PWI college campus. It is the significance of knowing that someone is available when needed and cares about their overall well-being. The creation of this sense of belonging also positively influences the academic achievement, retention, and ability of Black students to persist at a PWI.

Kane (2019) distinguished that trust is built through authentic relationships that are fostered between students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Vulnerability is a prominent factor in the formation of rapport, as it bridges the gap between the students and campus partners. Kane (2019) also noted that their representation on college and

university campuses establishes a community where students feel safe to speak up and advocate for themselves. Noddings (2013) defined this method of trust building as caring for someone or having great regard for them. Previous studies have also demonstrated that this form of intentional effort from faculty, staff, and administrators can significantly influence building trust and rapport with the students. Foxx (2021) highlighted when students have greater involvement and more contact with faculty and peers, they are more than likely to feel supported. Moreover, Vaccaro and Newman (2016); Strayhorn (2018) research examined individual behaviors significant as they play a pivotal role in building and fostering relationships. This further validates the importance that students who have someone available that they trust to support and coach them to the finish line. A campus environment that facilitates the development of trust with students is crucial for their long-term success. Furthermore, these contexts can enhance the perceived social and academic supportiveness of the campus environment (Foxx, 2021).

Trust and rapport were also major themes that emerged from the participants' interviews. Tinto's Model of Retention asserts that all students come to colleges and universities with a lifetime of prior experiences; and these experiences shape how students experience the array of different communities at educational institutions (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (2012) also argues that universities and colleges' capacities to foster a welcoming environment enhance students' abilities to feel brave, safe, and supported when making decisions regarding their goals. This also affirms Tinto's model of retention and highlights that students who feel that they are part of a larger group increase their potential to persist and graduate.

Bandura's Self efficacy theory is defined as the beliefs or perceptions that students hold regarding their ability to organize and implement actions needed to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1986). Building trust and rapport with students are critical components that can increase their opportunity to attain their educational goals and foster self-efficacy (Thomas et.al, 2009). Studies have also shown that students who have stronger self-efficacy will also achieve better academic success. Chemers and Garcia (2001) revealed that individuals who report elevated levels of self-efficacy demonstrate a greater tendency to perceive stressful situations as challenges rather than threats. Consequently, exhibiting heightened motivation to persist despite encountering challenges.

Participants also explained that establishing trust and rapport with faculty, staff, and administrators influenced their sense of belonging. Responses also indicated that trust and rapport positively influence Black students' academic achievement, retention, and ability to persist at PWIs. Research participant, Malika Thompson recalled the experience of having an administrator visit the class.

“Recently the Chancellor came to my class and talked to all of us and was trying to figure out what kind of things do you need? And how can I make it better on campus for you?”

Participant Katherine Rieves also shared the importance of having intentional support from faculty and staff.

“You could tell they really wanted us to succeed, and made it a point for us to, you know, be exceptional, and what we do to be scholars, to not lack in any area.”

This feeling of support was mutually shared by the participants in their

description of the Afro Excellence Sisters Network and Brotherly Achieve program.

Fundamentally, trust is built through authentic relationships that are fostered between students, faculty, staff, and administrators. During the interviews, participants intentionally reported the need to feel welcomed, valued, and accepted as a full member of their campus community. Katherine Rieves also shared, “It’s good to have a person you can talk to even when it’s not about, like class. Just being able to talk to ask for help on assignments whenever I need it.”

When asked about building relationships, Zion Campbell mentioned,

“I guess another one of my campus moms or sisters is Miss Amelia Winters. She works in admissions and is part of my Greek family as well. And with that relationship there’s just another place that I can go to for support and help.”

Another participant Olivia Rodgers spoke about how trust and support have been vital during their academic journey,

“Honestly, like I have had two different experiences. I came here in 2016 and then I took a break in 2018 because it was kind of getting a little hard, but that was just because my personal life was affecting academics. And one main person who was like with me through that process was Victoria Dubois. And I really appreciate that. Like it meant a lot to be like, I see you, I’m hearing you, I understand, like, but I still want you to finish strong and to come back and like, I’m going to encourage you. So, she’s been really great with that.”

The participants articulated similar feelings about their experiences with faculty and staff and how they have contributed to their personal and academic growth.

A campus environment that fosters trust with students is crucial for their long-term success (Strayhorn, 2018). The participants' experiences consistently established that trust and rapport were vital components that fostered the space for them to feel inclined to speak freely.

Mentorship and Guidance

Nel Noddings emphasizes the importance of an ethic of care in relationships, asserting that caring relationships are foundational for effective teaching and learning (Noddings, 1984). In the context of higher education, mentorship grounded in the ethic of care goes beyond traditional academic advising. Noddings (1992) argues that caring interactions between mentors and students contribute to the holistic development of students. Some participants noted that they viewed mentors in a familial sense. This demonstrates how mentors who actively engage and demonstrate care for the well-being of their mentees create a supportive and empathetic learning environment in which a student is more likely to thrive (Noddings, 2010).

When students perceive that their mentors genuinely care about their personal and academic success, they are more likely to persist during their college journey (Noddings, 2003). This is evidenced by participants who mentioned "feeling seen," for example. This approach fosters a supportive and inclusive environment in which individuals feel valued and understood.

Vincent Tinto's student retention and persistence model provides a framework for understanding the contribution of mentorship to college success. Tinto argues that successful integration into academic and social aspects of college life is crucial for student persistence (Tinto, 1993). The feedback from the participants illustrates the key

role mentors have in the facilitation of this integration by providing guidance beyond academic or instructional support. In doing so, mentors contribute to a sense of belonging and connection to the institution, enhancing students' likelihood of persisting through challenges and ultimately achieving their academic goals (Strayhorn, 2022).

Albert Bandura's social learning theory explores how mentorship influences college persistence. Bandura argues that individuals learn through observation and modeling (Bandura, 1977). In the context of mentorship, mentors serve as role models, and their behaviors and attitudes can significantly influence the persistence and success of their mentees (Bandura, 1986). Bandura's theory implies that mentors should prioritize positive role modeling. One participant discussed their exposure to a particular staff member who had accomplished many of the goals toward which the participant was working. This introduction allowed the student to be inspired by her accomplishments and realized the potential for connection. Mentors who embody resilience, self-efficacy, and a growth mindset can inspire and empower their mentees (Bandura, 1997). Students who observe and imitate positive behaviors may develop the confidence and motivation needed to persist through challenges and setbacks.

Participants noted receiving mentorship from various sources such as faculty, administration, staff, and peers. Katherine Rieves mentioned how "having staff and professors and all that that care about you and want you to succeed" was an essential factor for their success.

In Jordan Miller's interview, he mentioned that he was extremely close to his mentors and some of his professors and noted familial community as a positive aspect of continuing their education:

“Mentors, extremely close. Lots of professors. Also, very close. I would say Dr. Smith for example, in terms of Triumph Initiative office, she just feels, feels like family. You can always turn to her; you always have ears open. But I will say that there are also lots of professors that are like that as well, even outside the Triumph Initiative office.”

Zion Campbell spoke very highly about one of his mentors, Amelia Winters. He acknowledges her for his employment and for providing academic advice:

“Part of the reason why I even have the tour job is like, I’m helping her out. But I’m also getting help, because I needed some type of money flowing in to pay for everything, etc. So even me getting the job and being able to do these things have been because of the connection I found with her, and is a relationship that’s not just work is more... And that’s helping me because I’ve needed advice on what to do for my masters, or what to do with certain programs on campus. And it’s somebody I can go to about anything. So yeah.”

The participant feedback demonstrates the crucial role mentors have in the facilitation of social integration by providing guidance beyond academic or instructional support.

Jordan Miller mentioned that he knew of students who left the university due to lack of guidance:

“I’ve also talked to three students who have left AWU just because they felt like, well, who were not in the Triumph Initiative program. And I mean the core reason that they told me was just because they didn’t know what they’re doing, and they just didn’t feel like they belonged. So, they just left. But I think definitely support group with Black mentors help tremendously. At least for me it did.”

Subtheme: Culturally Relevant Mentorship

Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging theory connects the roles of social and academic integration to foster a sense of belonging among students in higher education. Strayhorn's theory posits that a positive sense of belonging contributes to increased student engagement, persistence, and academic success (Strayhorn, 2019). The Triumph Initiative is an example of collegiate programming at a university aiming to promote inclusivity, mentorship, and community building initiatives.

A subtheme that consistently emerged under mentorship and guidance was culturally relevant mentorship. Terrell Strayhorn's research related to culturally relevant mentorship addresses the unique challenges that students from diverse backgrounds experience. Strayhorn argues that mentors must be culturally competent to support students effectively through their academic journey (Strayhorn, 2010). Culturally competent mentors can better understand and support the aspirations of their mentees, enhancing their academic and personal development (Strayhorn, 2010). Participant responses note that culturally relevant mentorship contributes to the success of individual mentees and fosters a more inclusive and equitable educational environment, ultimately fostering a supportive environment that promotes college persistence (Strayhorn, 2019). Participant Malika Thompson mentioned that "creating that foundation with Black faculty and staff, and also other students that look like me help me have a foundation starting off."

In the Marian Williams interview, they noted,

"There needs to be resources where we feel like, can I relate, and look like us? I feel like that makes sense." Another participant noted "I also had my teacher, Dr.

Ferguson my freshman year for my African American Texts introduction class.

He seriously helped me a lot. And I think really just building that support group, I think just for students of color makes a humongous difference.

Some participants mentioned their mentor as a role model. In the context of mentorship, mentors serve as role models, and their behaviors and attitudes can significantly influence the persistence and success of their mentees (Bandura, 1986). In Chiquita Baisden's interview, she shared that she was introduced to the Triumph Initiative as a summer program:

“They introduced us to a bunch of people like Ms. Victoria. I need to know this lady, I thought. I really need to get to know this person because she has done all the things I want to do.”

This introduction allowed this student to be inspired by her accomplishments and reaffirm her potential for success. It is essential to note that culture on college and university campuses establishes a community in which students can feel safe to speak up and advocate for themselves.

Campus Resources

Another emerging theme was the need to understand, utilize, and be connected to campus resources. The transition from high school to college can be challenging. Navigating campus, understanding faculty expectations, and utilizing campus resources can be overwhelming to many incoming first-year students. In addition, being a first-generation college student may produce a cause for alarm. Since first-generation college students are the first member in their family to attend college, they may lack the foundational knowledge and understanding to feel confident upon entering college.

Terrell Strayhorn emphasizes the importance of understanding factors that contribute to student success, particularly the role of campus engagement (Strayhorn, 2008). In a 2008 article, Dr. Terrell Strayhorn investigates the intersections of academic, social, and cultural dimensions that illustrate how students can thrive in a university environment. Thus, institutions that connect college students to campus resources can address their diverse needs and foster a supportive environment conducive to personal growth and academic achievement.

Nel Noddings' (1984) "Ethics of Care" theory addresses the benefit of connecting students to campus resources. In this theory, Noddings asserts that care is paramount when working with students in an educational system. She emphasizes that empathy and caring relationships are key to helping one achieve success. Campus resources establish channels for communication between students, faculty, and staff and can also be used to build a sense of community and provide a student-centered approach to education. Resources such as libraries, counseling centers, and tutoring spaces can be organized to facilitate a caring and supportive environment that includes diverse students and ensures they feel cared for during their educational journey. Some participants noted how faculty and staff connect incoming students with campus resources, cultivating an environment in which they felt connected and supported. Vincent Tinto's model of Student Integration (1993) asserts that student success is closely tied to a student's integration into the academic and social fabric of the university, suggesting that concepts such as academic rigor and social integration relate to the availability and utilization of campus resources. The establishment of meaningful connections with campus resources allows students to

navigate challenges, foster a sense of belonging, and enhance their academic and personal development.

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977) introduces the concept of academic self-efficacy, emphasizing the role of self-belief in academic achievement. Bandura's framework discusses how connecting students to campus resources can enhance their self-efficacy. University support bolsters students' knowledge, confidence, and awareness that contributes to the development of resilient and empowered learners. It was through these relationships and networks that her self-efficacy was born.

Bandura defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations (Bandura, 1977). Campus resources can be utilized to increase students' knowledge of resources available, thus enhancing their self-efficacy. Bandura's theory explains that individuals can serve as models for others. In the context of higher education, instructors and mentors are significant models for students. Campus resources can be directed towards faculty development programs, mentoring initiatives, and training to ensure that educators serve as positive models, demonstrating effective learning strategies and fostering a culture of continuous learning (Strayhorn, 2019)

A common sentiment shared by participants was that part of their success at the University is predicated on the knowledge, understanding, and utilization of campus resources. First-generation college students are the first in their families to attend college and may lack the foundational knowledge, understanding, and know-how to feel confident upon entering college.

Zion Campbell stated his primary concern as, “connect me with campus resources, and give me tips and strategies on how to be successful as a Black man on this campus.”

Jordan Miller shared his observation of campus resources and its correlation to retention.

“Also, when it comes to this campus, when I was on student government, I noticed looking at the numbers that the more marginalized groups that were in clubs that were essentially safe spaces, the retention just pretty much went straight through the roof. And it’s the ones that weren’t in those safe spaces where those are the ones that you really had to try to catch because they were most likely just going to leave.”

Olivia Rodgers shared in her interview that she credits her academic success at the University to her campus involvement and knowledge of the resources available for the student body.

“I feel like I can access different organization leaders and administrators because I already have a connection with them, and they see me working around the school.”

Olivia goes on to mention that by being a part of ROTC and being heavily involved on campus empowered her to take ownership of her academic journey and future goals. She stated, “So, I have signed a contract with ROTC which will allow me to be an officer in the military once I complete my master’s program. I’m also interested in being a primary adviser to veterans since I am a Vet.” The participant expressed that she could only go after her dreams because she felt connected, supported, and empowered by the faculty and staff relationships she experienced.

Barriers to Success

The team interviewed ten students to examine the influence caring Black faculty and staff has on academic success and achievement. We examined if learning environments where caring persons and experiences were provided added to the academic success of these students. Participants shared many events that they described as caring and essential to their sustainability. Participants were also transparent about challenges and barriers among faculty, staff, administration, other students, their internal fears, and the structures and governing entities of the university. They openly discussed how facing these challenges led to the creation of unnecessary obstacles, some of which were intentional, but they emphasized their determination to persist despite these hurdles. However, participants recalled classmates who could not overcome the impediments and eventually withdrew from the university.

Many participants identified faculty and instructors as their most significant obstacles due to “non-caring” attitudes, lack of cultural understanding, and generational gaps. Marsha Lewis, a sophomore, said, “Some teachers make it really hard for no reason.” Marian Williams, a junior, described her experiences when meeting with instructors or faculty: “I am coming in this office, and the energy is, you know, very standoffish. Very, you know, I don’t know, well I would. You know I don’t know what you want me to do”. This was a sentiment expressed by several participants. Marsha also stated “Oh, I really feel our instructors don’t provide care. It’s kinda hard because they don’t always understand. When you ask them a question, they do not always understand, and they will give you a short, generalized answer instead of trying to help.” Marsha goes on to say, “They do not understand our mental health and things. They think we should

just do our work and just get on with it.” When asked what the university could do to mediate some of these obstacles, Katherine Rieves responded, “Umm, I would say it could reflect by having the instructors and professors take a course in mental health because there is a gap between the generations. Our generation is, we are more mental health-oriented, and they think you just got to push through and keep going.”

Other participants expressed that faculty and instructors needed cultural awareness, or they feared that faculty and instructors did not understand them ethnically. Marsha stated, “Because I go to a PWI, so I just have the fear of them not understanding and knowing where I am coming from.”

The participants also stated that faculty and instructors need to care about accommodating student needs and schedules and making themselves sufficiently available to support students. Marian stated, “They could have more time for each subject, and that would really be helpful because people are busy like everybody is busy and staff. So, they could have more opportunities to access that stuff. Then I think they would be able to do better.” Further, participants stated that faculty, instructors, and academic support staff do not care enough about students to do the extra tasks that can make a difference. Marsha said, for example, “Yes, they are student workers, but I believe they could connect with the professors so they can begin to understand what professors want from us.”

The participants were woeful in their reflections on administrators. When asked, “How do administrators show care to students,” most participants stated without hesitation that administrators do not care about them. Jordan Miller, a senior, stated, “There is no relationship with the administration. They kind of are just there... I wouldn't

really consider them close or anything like that. They're kinda stand-offish. They just kinda do their own thing and try to stay out of the way." Jordan also reflected on the administrator's lack of caring and concern regarding marginalized communities at the university. He expressed grave concerns about Black students, Muslims, and LGBTQ plus community: "Upper administration is just completely hands-off, and I think that's where the care is lacking. They (administrators) want nothing to do with certain topics. They try to stay neutral, but as you know, neutral can be an answer in itself." Lois stated there is no strong relationship between Black students and the administration. On the contrary, the participants stated that Black faculty, staff, and administrators are caring, supportive, and available and are exemplars of behaviors and attitudes that the students need and seek to emulate. Zion Campbell stated, "The University does not hear Black students. The Black faculty does."

Zion also discussed barriers that derive from the governing bodies of the university. He desired that the university and the student government to bolster Black student retention and attempted to discuss it at a student senate meeting. However, the effort fell short. He said of his experience, "When I brought it up in a Senate meeting, they just went around it. And that troubled me." Further, he stated that administrators do not show care for marginalized students when they do not address hate speech on campus or hateful actions toward students of color, Muslims, and LGBTQ plus students. He was particularly disturbed by an individual who often protested against Muslims on campus and who also engaged in hateful action. In his interview, Jordan Miller inferred that freedom of speech protects the individual, but the administration has done nothing to address other hateful actions directed at other groups, such as spitting at Muslim

students. He stated, “It fell on students and people of color to really counter that hate speech.”

Participants consistently identified isolation as a barrier for Black students. They described the campus as being deceptively diverse, as there are many Black students and other students of color, many religions, and sexualities. Nevertheless, the students do not interact, and Black students are particularly isolated due to their discomfort. ’Chiquita Baisden’s vivid description clarifies this point:

“So visually it is diverse, but socially, uuuh, not so much. You can see a couple of fringe groups with a mix of races, but it is not as mixed socially as I would want it to be. I can see different people of different backgrounds everywhere and that is beautiful to me. I would like to have a nice conversation with them without it being so awkward. I just wish we had a better connection.”

Marsha went further to discuss the awkwardness of Black students and how it inhibits them from participating in events and meeting in spaces that are predominantly white and a reminder that they are attending a PWI.

“They (Black students) support it like when somebody else does an event, and then when someone else (White students) does an event, we really don’t attend because we really feel out of place at the predominantly white spaces.”

Marian stated, “There is a feeling of out of place at events given by someone other than African American students.” Marian also talked about the more significant societal division between Blacks and Whites:

“And you know, it’s like because always that perspective when you go to a PWI, it’s always the ‘us versus them’ type thing. But you realize you are at a PWI.”

Participants often showed frustration with leadership and decision-makers whom they perceive to have access to make meaningful policy, funding, and staffing changes. They believe the administration could be more strategic and intentional in action steps that help Black students succeed, but they do not prioritize Black students' needs.

Annette stated,

“You’re not looking into the factors as to why a lot of these Black and brown students leave, why we are dropping out, or why we’re not staying in school, period. You know.”

Further, the participants said the university needs to expand successful programs such as the Triumph Initiative. They brand themselves as examples of the impact of a program that provides caring, supportive people and services for students. Zion described the necessity:

“Marginalized communities need more resources. The resources need to be much larger, though, especially if they want to achieve more marginalized community graduates. There is a lot of people that would like to get into the Triumph Initiative, and they simply can’t accommodate them.”

Students create barriers for their peers when they engage in negativity and isolate their fellow students. Chiquita Baisden was incredibly passionate in her interview when she shared a recent experience with some Black students at her university. She talked about how the unbecoming conversations and interactions between these Black students railed against the sense of belonging those students identified as vital to their success.

Chiquita said,

“I did not know anything that was going on with my peers, and I could see how they treated each other, and I don’t want to do that. I don’t like negativity. Because a student can bring you negativity. I don’t want any type of negativity. Students could be more supportive of each other. College is already hard enough.”

She stated that Black staff and administration mediated in this matter, but her peers were not receptive to their assistance.

Many participants talked about that sense of belonging that comes from their interactions with staff, faculty, administration, and peers. When anything unravels that necessary mindset, a student can become endangered. Maya Reynolds attributed her first year’s difficulty to feeling lonely and an unawareness of Black student organizations and Black faculty and staff mentorship. The participants referred to it extensively throughout the interviews. They responded to the absence of Black staff in various spaces and perceived it as harmful. Maya firmly stated her belief that the administration does not care about Black students because she does not see people who look like her. When asked if the administration cares for Black students, she said, “No! Nothing but White folks up in there!” As participants stated, they need more Blacks in all roles, such as tutors, and it is essential to have tutors who look like them. Participants noted that Black tutors could help reduce their anxiety when they are already in a state of fear. The cultural barrier can be an obstacle for a student who needs assistance.

The research and thoughts of Nel Noddings, Albert Bandura, Strayhorn, and Vincent Tinto serve as a pathway to examine and mitigate the barriers discovered in the ten interviews. Noddings’ (2013) concepts regarding caring are essential in this

discussion, as the participants all identified that an experience of being cared for by the people affiliated with the university is crucial. It reverberated throughout the conversations. Noddings speaks of the obligation of everyone to care and be a “one-caring”; stating “We all bear a responsibility for the ethical perfection of others” (Noddings, 2013, p. 171)). However, she is forthright regarding this obligation for teachers and educational institutions. Noddings (2013) theorized that the primary responsibility of educational institutions is “the maintenance and enhancement of caring” (p.172). She stated that a teacher, first, is one-caring and is engrossed in their students’ needs first.

When the administrators, the faculty, the instructors, and the staff did not do their first job – being the “one-caring,” it could be conjectured that this failure left students feeling dissatisfied, disconnected, and feeling like they did not belong. It created an impediment to students’ development and self-efficacy. If the university personnel, from the Chancellor to the custodian, demonstrate that they care, the students will sense the care and embrace it. When they do not care, the students will sense and reject it. Self-efficacy is a complex state of mind that develops throughout multiple stages during the cognitive process according to Bandura (1977). It manifests as a person intentionally or unintentionally observes the actions of another entity’. The learner internalizes their observations and leverages the learning experiences to determine their goals and actions. The learner develops a sense of confidence in themselves and believes that he or she can obtain the same outcome. If the observer has a high regard for their mentor, he or she will likely foster a high outcome expectancy (Bandura, 1977).

As the concept is applied to the participants, we acknowledge their goal to complete a bachelor's degree at a PWI. Noting the theories of Bandura, the participants are not likely to succeed in this goal if they do not believe from within themselves that they can accomplish this task. As mentioned earlier, the participants must observe people who are significant to them, as they are the people who most influence their thinking and behaviors. The participants must see other successful Black students and Black people who completed Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees.

The participants verbalized the importance of exemplars when discussing the staff who mentors them. Chiquita said she wanted to be like Victoria and Dr. Janice Smith. Several participants said they wanted to learn what to do and what not to do from them. Some professors, instructors, and administrators do not listen to the Black students or attempt to have an authentic interest in them as a people, according to most of the participants. Some professors did not put their students' needs before their own. As stated earlier in this study, those actions caused students to disconnect from institutional personnel and deterred them from developing a sense of belonging.

The university failed to expand funding to successful programs for Black students, and the student government showed no interest in addressing Black student retention. Jordan emphatically stated how those actions deeply troubled him and caused irreparable damage to his sense of belonging.

Strayhorn (2019) expounds that Black college students must build a sense of belonging on their campuses. The sense of belonging reinforces their determination to stay and persist through graduation. As Jordan stated about his former classmates, the lack of feeling as though they belonged caused them to drop out. Participant Zion

Campbell also stated, “They (Black students) need a support system and a community. Black students feel out of place, big or small. They need somebody to lean on.”

Strayhorn’s theories related to the sense of belonging echoed the participants’ stories. He posited that negative college experiences are detrimental to the student’s sense of belonging. He elaborates on this thought, stating that belonging is essential to the student’s viability (Strayhorn 2019).

Tinto (2010) argues that to increase retention in higher education institutions, universities must create active communities that are focused on care, social interactions, and intellectual exchange. Some participants emphatically stated that they thrived as a result of their participation in this community, while others shared their feelings of loneliness before becoming a part of the Triumph Initiative. Many of them said their community is a part of the Triumph Initiative and that they needed interaction with these students and staff. Maya said, “The care feels different when it comes from someone who looks like me.” She also said that it was the support of family and professors as she stated, “...knowing that they got my back.” Maya’s story exemplifies Tinto’s theory that a student’s actual college experience and interactions with professors, students, and staff are paramount to any other aspect of college life and persistence to graduation.

Summary of Results

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the power and impact of creating caring spaces for Black first-generation college students at PWIs. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach in order that the researchers could gather in-depth insights into the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of Black

students at PWIs regarding culturally inclusive and caring spaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of Black students to capture rich, descriptive accounts of students' experiences. We discovered critical findings as part of our investigation.

Black students expressed the significance of having culturally inclusive and caring spaces to foster a sense of belonging within the PWI community. These spaces allowed them to feel supported, empowered, and encouraged to succeed academically and socially.

These spaces were identified as crucial for supporting Black students' emotional well-being and mental health at PWIs. Participants also described these spaces to be safe havens where they could openly discuss challenges related to racism, discrimination, and microaggressions without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the positive impact of culturally inclusive and caring spaces for the retention and persistence of Black students at PWIs. Participants reported higher engagement, satisfaction, and commitment to their academic and personal goals due to their involvement in these spaces.

Overall, the findings underscore the transformative power of creating retention-benefitting, culturally inclusive, caring spaces for Black students at PWIs. A supportive environment can validate their identities, experiences, and aspirations and enhance the academic success, emotional well-being, and retention.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that emerged from this discussion, anchored in the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2), revolves around understanding the multifaceted aspects of

Black students' experiences at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). It mainly emphasizes the impact of caring relationships in relation to their sense of belonging, retention, and overall engagement. This care model illustrates the main themes of sense of belonging, mentorship and guidance, and access to campus resources with corresponding sub-themes, thereby creating a nuanced understanding of how these elements influence student satisfaction and commitment (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

Figure 2

B.L.A.C.K. CASHE Care Model

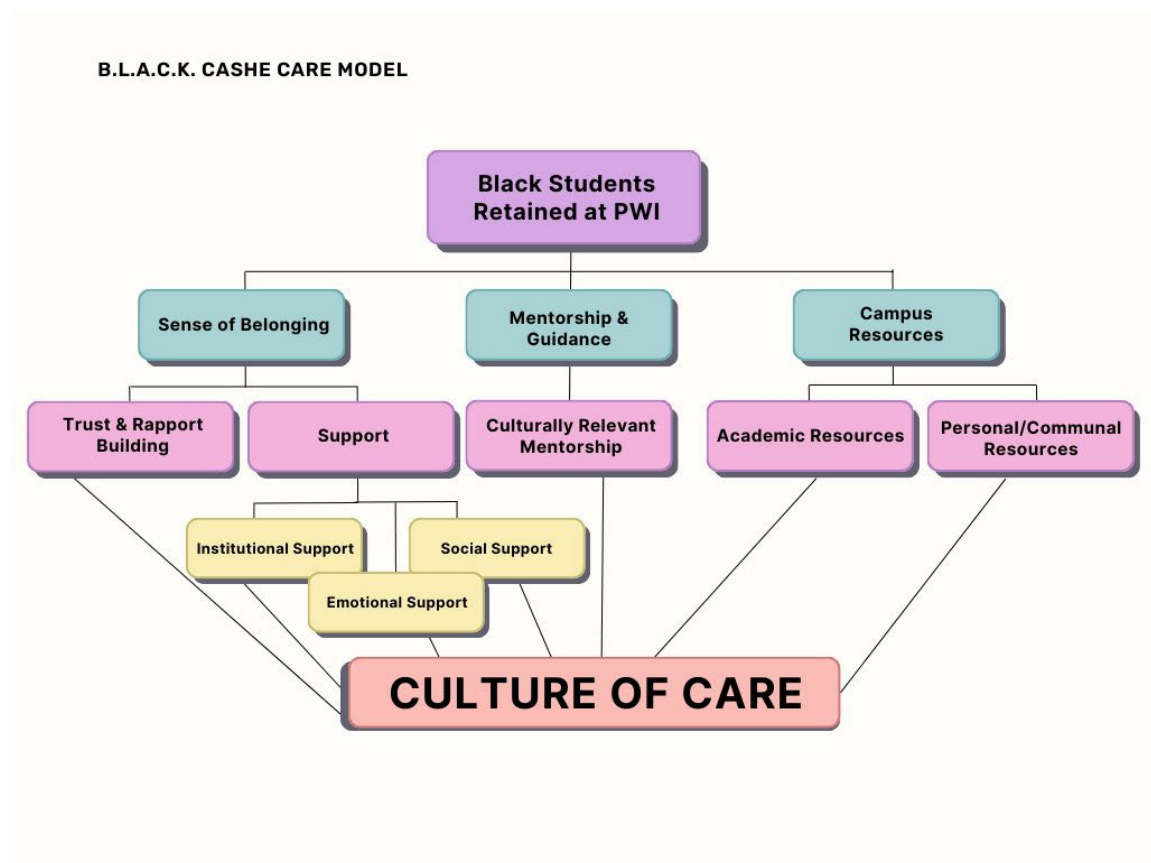


Table 1

B.L.A.C.K. CASHE Care Model and Alignment Table

Care Model and Alignment
<p>Sense of Belonging: This is identified as a critical factor to enhance Black Students' experiences at PWIs</p> <p>Sub-themes: institutional support, social and emotional support, and community cultivation directly relate to how students perceive the care and attention they receive from higher education professionals (RQ1). This theme aligns with RQ2 to illustrate a strong sense of belonging fostered through various forms of support, can positively influence college persistence and retention. fostered through various forms of support, can positively influence college persistence and retention.</p>
<p>Mentorship and Guidance: Mentors are instrumental to the success of Black students.</p> <p>Sub-themes: trust, rapport building, and culturally relevant mentorship highlight the dynamics of caring relationships (RQ1). These sub-themes suggest that mentorship goes beyond academic advice, encompassing emotional support and cultural understanding. This aligns with RQ2 to demonstrate that effective mentorship, characterized by trust and cultural relevance, can significantly impact students' decisions to persist and succeed in their academic endeavors.</p>
<p>Access to Campus Resources: The university provides convenient and high-quality campus resource to meet the diverse needs of Black students.</p> <p>Sub-themes involving the availability of institutional support networks and culturally responsive resources indicate the breadth of care provided by higher education professionals (RQ1). The linkage with RQ2 is evident here too, as the presence of supportive and inclusive resources can directly influence student engagement, satisfaction, and their decision to remain at the institution.</p>
<p>Alignment with Research Questions</p> <p>RQ1 (Perception of Caring Relationships: The conceptual framework emphasizes that the perception of caring relationships is multi-dimensional, encompassing not just academic support but also emotional, social, and cultural aspects of support. Each main theme and its sub-themes contribute to painting a comprehensive picture of how Black students perceive these relationships.</p> <p>RQ2 (Influence on Persistence and Retention: The framework shows that caring relationships, as perceived through various supports and resources, have a tangible impact on students' persistence and retention. The sense of belonging, effective mentorship, and access to adequate resources collectively enhance student commitment and satisfaction, key indicators of successful college retention.</p>

This conceptual framework, therefore, integrates the themes and sub-themes into a cohesive structure that addresses the research questions by highlighting the complexity and interconnectedness of the factors that affect Black students' experiences at PWIs. It elucidates how caring relationships, as manifested through various supports and mentorship, shape students' sense of belonging, access to resources, and their engagement, satisfaction, and commitment to their educational journey.

CHAPTER IV: DISSEMINATION FOR IMPROVEMENT

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on the power of creating retention-benefitting, culturally inclusive, caring spaces for Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The implications of this qualitative phenomenological study are significant and multifaceted. Retention-benefitting, culturally inclusive, caring spaces for Black students at PWIs are critical for their success. The study's findings can inform higher education policy, practice, and institutional approaches.

Implications of Findings

Firstly, the research may highlight the specific factors within these supportive spaces that contribute to increased retention rates for Black students, providing valuable insights for educators and administrators. By gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of Black students, educators and other professionals who work in such environments become enlightened on the challenges that the students encounter and the coping mechanisms that prove effective. This information is crucial for the development of targeted support systems and interventions tailored to the unique needs of Black students in PWIs. Additionally, the study may underscore the importance of cultural inclusivity and care to promote a positive learning environment, foster a sense of belonging, and ultimately influence academic success.

Institutional leaders can use the implications to reevaluate and enhance existing diversity and inclusion initiatives to ensure that they are effectively fostering a supportive campus culture. Furthermore, the research may encourage ongoing dialogue and

collaboration among students, faculty, and administrators in order to improve and adapt these supportive spaces continually.

The qualitative phenomenological implications extend beyond academia, potentially influencing broader conversations regarding equity and inclusivity in educational settings. When faculty, staff, and institutional administrators recognize and address the specific needs of Black students at PWIs, these institutions can contribute to a more equitable and supportive higher education environment for all students.

Professional Implications

The principles that foster Culture of Care services and sense of belonging practices, often observed in higher education settings, possess broader applicability beyond academia. These services and practices can be applied to businesses and corporations. The core tenet of fostering a culture of care centers ensuring that individuals within a community feel acknowledged, valued, and supported in their endeavors. This model of support holds immense potential to enhance group dynamics across various organizational structures.

Dr. Terrell Strayhorn advocates for the adoption of this practice in workplaces and emphasizes its role in cultivating a sense of belonging among employees. He defines this form of sense of belonging as “the emotional connection to a company that employees feel, reflecting their appreciation, inclusion, respect, and support within the work environment” (Strayhorn, 2024).

The establishment of such a work environment is imperative, as it provides a framework for employee support and correlates with increased levels of job satisfaction and overall happiness. Strayhorn observes that solid relationships, a sense of purpose, and

a feeling of value contribute to an emotionally invested workforce, fostering a positive corporate culture, enhancing collaboration, and maximizing productivity (Strayhorn, 2024).

When corporations and leaders fail to prioritize a sense of belonging in the workplace, they risk facing dire consequences, as evidenced by recent incidents, such as the resignation of Harvard University's first African American President, Claudine Gay, amid allegations of workplace pressure and bullying. Similarly, the tragic suicide of Antoinette "Bonnie" Candia-Bailey, Vice President at Lincoln University, following years of workplace harassment, underscores the critical importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment.

These incidents underscore the urgent need for further research regarding strategies to cultivate a sense of belonging in the workplace. Investments in initiatives that prioritize employee well-being can mitigate organizations' risk of detrimental outcomes associated with workplace toxicity, while fostering an environment in which individuals feel valued, respected, and supported in the pursuit of their professional endeavors.

Equity Ramifications

Recent affirmative action decisions implemented in 2023 have significant social justice implications in order to foster inclusive and empowering environments for Black students in predominantly White institutions, particularly in terms of retention and cultural engagement strategies. Firstly, the alteration of affirmative action policies may impact the demographic composition of student bodies, potentially reducing the presence of underrepresented minority groups, including Black students. This shift could diminish

the diversity essential for the enrichment of academic discourse and challenging ingrained biases.

Secondly, legislative modifications to affirmative action policies may exacerbate feelings of exclusion and marginalization among Black students in predominantly White institutions. If proactive measures are not implemented to counteract these effects, Black students may experience heightened isolation and struggle to find a sense of belonging within academic settings. Consequently, retention rates may decline as Black students encounter barriers to academic success and social integration.

Furthermore, the shift in the adoption of affirmative action policies may undermine efforts to address systemic inequalities within higher education. This approach perpetuates structural behaviors that hinder progress towards equity and justice restricting opportunities for Black students to access educational resources and opportunities. Additionally, the erosion of affirmative action policies sends a troubling message about the value placed on diversity and inclusion within educational institutions, potentially signaling to Black students that their presence and contributions are undervalued.

Inclusive and empowering environments for Black students require renewed commitment and innovation. Institutions must prioritize proactive recruitment and retention strategies that prioritize diversity and equity, including targeted support programs, mentorship initiatives, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Moreover, institutions must actively challenge systemic inequities and create spaces where Black students feel affirmed, supported, and empowered to thrive academically and personally. Institutions can cultivate inclusive environments where every student has the chance to

thrive and contribute to a more equitable society by prioritizing the voices and experiences of Black students and advocating for policies that advance equity and justice.

Limitations of Study

Several limitations were encountered during this study, which merit acknowledgment. First, the challenge of recruiting participants was notable due to limited student availability during the fall semester. Balancing academic commitments, work obligations, and social activities posed a difficulty to secure student participation. The research team sent multiple reminder emails and follow-up phone calls, but despite our efforts, recruitment remained a challenge, affecting the overall sample size.

Second, all participants were actively enrolled in a Black student retention program on campus, homogenizing their experiences to a certain extent. This lack of variability in participant backgrounds may have limited the generalizability of our findings beyond the context of similar retention programs. However, it is worth noting that this homogeneity also provided valuable insights into the consistent impact of the retention program on student experiences.

Third, the initial target sample size of 15-20 students was not achieved, as saturation was reached prematurely during the data collection. Consequently, participation was concluded with ten students, which may have influenced the breadth and depth of the data collected. Despite this limitation, the qualitative nature of the study, which employed a phenomenological approach, allowed for the rich exploration of the shared experiences of the individuals within the retention program.

Despite these limitations, our study illuminates the significant impact of the Black student retention program on student outcomes related to retention and persistence.

Future research endeavors could address these limitations through the use of diverse recruitment strategies, including participants from a broader range of retention programs, and exploring additional factors that influence student experiences and outcomes.

Recommendations and Dissemination

This section outlines the key recommendations derived from the findings of the study/project and strategies for disseminating these findings to relevant stakeholders.

Develop intentional programming that is grounded in care. Employ people who encourage a caring culture and high expectations.

Participants emphasized the importance of faculty and instructor support by highlighting accessibility and flexibility as key elements of care. It is essential to incorporate components central to successful student retention, as identified by Tinto (2010). These components include clearly stated expectations, support mechanisms, ongoing assessment, feedback loops, and student involvement. Tinto also stresses the importance of assessment and feedback in a successful retention program. Student feedback is crucial to inform leadership decisions. Frequent survey and interviews that engage Black students can yield valuable insights into the key factors that are essential to curating a sense of belonging and feeling care from others within the school community. This approach not only allows students to share their perspectives but also reinforces their sense of importance and belonging within the institution (Strayhorn, 2012). Program directors/managers should conduct timely evaluations of activities to gauge their impact on student success.

Participants also highlighted the sense of belonging that they derive from interactions with staff, faculty, administration, and peers. Leadership responsibility is

crucial as they establish the tone when they select individuals—whether employed or volunteers—who are well-suited for the task. According to Hattie (2012), educators must have faith in 'the capabilities of students to succeed and overcome challenges openly. These individuals must genuinely value caring for others and have an unwavering belief in the students they serve.

Automatically enroll incoming undergraduate Black students in the program.

The university uses this model. The practice assures that Black students are connected and receive services at the onset of their matriculation at the university. Automatic enrollment could also appeal to students' sense of belonging, which fosters a feeling of home and support from faculty and staff (Dias, 2022). However, the student would still have the option to optout of the program. Their option to optout indicates their power to choose, and privacy is respected. The student who chooses to opt out of the program may then have a more favorable opinion of the program as they see other students benefiting from the program and they could subsequently join later.

Introduce Black students to all the Black staff affiliated with the institution.

It was noted by some participants that there is a need for faculty and instructors to cultivate cultural awareness, as they feared a lack of ethnic understanding among these individuals. Black students benefit from seeing individual similar to themselves represented in their academic environment. When individuals observe someone of the same race, community, gender, or disability who is achieving success, it fosters a sense of possibility and motivation. Staff members who share demographic similarities with students can serve as role models whom students admire and perceive as credible (Bandura, 1977). These individuals have a significant influence on students, encouraging

the adoption of positive learning behaviors and the development of self-efficacy, which directly correlates with academic achievement (ABD-EL-Fattah, 2005; Brown et al., 2008, as cited in Wood et al., 2015).

Encourage the involvement of all Black staff in many activities with students.

Increased representation of Black and brown faculty and staff across all roles within the university is imperative. This sentiment was repeatedly emphasized by participants throughout the interviews, who lamented the dearth of Black staff members in various spheres and perceived this absence as detrimental.

Black faculty and staff members are uniquely positioned to provide valuable support to Black students. They can serve as mentors, convene regular meetings with small groups of Black students, participate in networking events, and deliver presentations on topics of significance to these students. Incentivizing Black staff engagement, support, and connection with Black students on campus—whether by simply knowing their names and offering encouraging gestures—should be prioritized. These faculty and staff members exemplify a model of care that addresses students’ needs and cultivates their capacity for empathy, while simultaneously providing them with care (Noddings, 2013). Black faculty members, in particular, can significantly contribute to the development of self-efficacy among Black students. Through vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977), these staff members can demonstrate effective strategies for the navigation of challenging situations and thriving within a predominantly white institutional environment.

Provide training for advisors and instructors on establishing rapport with Black students and their families.

Participants indicated that meeting their parent's expectations for degree completion was the most significant factor related to their academic success. Young adult learners, particularly the youngest college students, greatly benefit from a positive connection between the university and parents. Building relationships with parents is a highly effective instructional practice that supports students' academic success (Hattie, 2012).

Furthermore, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which should be incorporated into the training of educators who work with Black and other students of color. Practitioners of CRP demonstrate belief in the students they teach, irrespective of their race or ethnicity. They understand the importance of acknowledging and respecting students' racial and cultural backgrounds and responding to their needs by familiarizing themselves with their cultural norms and practices. Effective advisors and instructional staff establish meaningful, compassionate relationships, and demonstrate a lasting commitment to their students. Students who receive empathetic support are more likely to develop a sense of belonging (Maloney and Matthews, 2020).

Maintain manageable student caseloads for Academic Advisors.

Students are more likely to persist and achieve academic success in their degree programs when they benefit from meaningful, authentic, and regular interactions with faculty and staff (Tinto, 1993). The Academic Advisor plays a pivotal role in a student's academic journey. However, when the advisor's caseload becomes overly burdensome, they lack sufficient time to effectively serve their students or to establish meaningful and

trusting relationships with them. Advisors must also adopt proactive advising practices that foster high levels of accountability from students.

Incorporate Black student organizations and Black Greek organizations into networking efforts.

Participants consistently identified isolation as a significant barrier for Black students on campus. It is essential for Black students to encounter other Black students, as they play a crucial role in the formation of a supportive community around new Black students, especially those who are first-generation. These students possess valuable cultural capital, as their life experiences are likely to be similar, and help foster a sense of belonging that is crucial for Black students. Before addressing higher-order needs such as knowledge and self-actualization, it is crucial to prioritize students' needs for belonging, as emphasized by Strahorn (2015). Student organizations serve as vital sources of social engagement for students to meet friends and mitigate feelings of isolation. Tinto (1990) emphasizes that institutions must prevent isolation and incongruence to retain students.

Furthermore, engaging upper-class Black students as mentors, support group leaders, tutors, and similar roles can be highly beneficial. These students possess enriching insights and perspectives that can aid newer students. They can engage in one-on-one mentoring or organize and lead small group sessions, providing a safe space for students to connect. Through these interactions, upper-class students reinforce their own skills while serving as role models for newer students. These spaces also allow for discussions about both successes and challenges, providing opportunities for mutual learning and growth. According to Bandura (1977), individuals become more efficacious when they confront their failures or learn from the adversities of others, particularly those

whom they admire. Additionally, Black students can offer a safe environment for tutoring, particularly in subjects where there are few Black student role models.

Provide tutoring that is accessible and in a welcoming, emotionally safe setting.

Offer tutoring services that are easily accessible and provided in a welcoming, emotionally supportive environment. For a student to feel committed to their own success, it is essential for the institution to demonstrate a commitment to their success as well (Tinto, 1993). As highlighted by participants, there is a pressing need for greater representation of Black individuals in all roles, including tutors, as it is crucial for students to have tutors who share their racial identity. Participants emphasized that having Black tutors could help alleviate anxiety, particularly when students are already feeling fearful. It is imperative for these services to incorporate culturally responsive practices and settings, for example Black Student Center.

College or University leadership must be engaged in campus diversity work.

University leadership must actively participate in campus diversity efforts. Some participants expressed deep dissatisfaction with administrators, citing frustration with their perceived lack of commitment to making meaningful policy changes, allocating funding, and staffing adequately to support Black students' success. They believe that the administration could be more strategic and intentional in taking action steps to address the needs of Black students, but they feel these needs are not prioritized. One participant pointed out, "You're not looking into the factors as to why a lot of these Black and brown students leave, why we are dropping out, or why we're not staying in school, period (Marian Williams Interview)."

A caring education requires intentionality and responsiveness to students' needs (Noddings, 2013). Effective leadership demonstrates the importance of diversity work by actively engaging in it and supporting the efforts of others, whether they are staff or students. It is not sufficient for persons of color hired by the institution to manage diversity-focused programming to be the sole faces seen by students and other staff members. White staff members in leadership positions must also be regularly visible, actively engaging with students of color, and building relationships with them. Otherwise, students and staff may see diversity as a low priority for the individuals and the institution.

Establish pre-collegiate programs tailored for Black students.

A summer program offered before the freshman year serves as a valuable opportunity to introduce incoming Black students to various aspects of campus life. This includes exposure to academic rigor, fostering good study habits, forming bonds with a cohort of classmates, receiving early support from campus professionals, and initiating essential relationships. Additionally, the summer period provides an ideal timeframe for students and their families to engage in activities that foster a sense of belonging. Developing and/or offering pre-collegiate programs linked to specific career paths, such as education, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), or Pre-Medicine promotes early engagement with Black students during their high school years. These programs can cultivate students' self-efficacy, foster a sense of belonging, and establish authentic, supportive relationships. Additionally, these programs may offer students the opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school.

Contributions to the Field

This scholarly research makes a substantive contribution to the academic discourse in education, specifically focusing on addressing the needs of Black, first-generation college students within predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The research underscores the foundational significance of trust, aligning with extant literature that emphasizes its pivotal role in cultivating a supportive and inclusive educational milieu. Noteworthy insights are derived from deliberate administrative initiatives, the acknowledgment of care as intrinsic to trust, and the validation of select aspects of Tinto's Model of Retention. Furthermore, the study underscores the pivotal role of Black faculty and staff, alongside peer relationships, in fortifying the fabric of a supportive academic community.

The research also sheds light on the distinctive challenges encountered by first-generation students, corroborating Strayhorn's emphasis on emotional connections and elucidating the relevance of Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. Real-world examples provided by participants illuminate the profound impact of emotional support on academic and personal growth, elevating the discourse. The multifaceted role of faculty and staff as mentors, actively advocating for student needs, enriches the scholarly discussion. Meticulously grounded in theoretical frameworks, these insights collectively contribute to a nuanced comprehension of emotional support dynamics for first-generation Black college students.

In the realm of mentorship and guidance, the study aligns with contemporary perspectives by accentuating the significance of holistic mentorship founded on an ethic of care, culturally relevant mentorship, and the integrative role mentors play in both social and academic realms. Participants' voices, conveying authentic experiences,

augment the research's depth and credibility, harmonizing effectively with the theoretical underpinnings of Noddings, Strayhorn, Tinto, and Bandura. By integrating perspectives derived from Strayhorn's and Tinto's frameworks, the research comprehensively examines the interplay between a sense of belonging and student retention, further substantiated through the participants' narratives. These diverse experiences underscore the crucial role played by Black faculty and staff in the support network.

In summary, this research uniquely amalgamates the theoretical frameworks of Noddings, Strayhorn, Tinto, and Bandura, with participants' voices amplifying the significance of intentional efforts, representation, and diversity in fostering supportive academic environments. The study emphasizes aspects such as cultural competence, positive role modeling, and varied support sources, aligning seamlessly with contemporary discourses on inclusive education. Importantly, the findings advance our comprehension of the intricate nature of support structures and the pivotal role a sense of belonging plays in the success and retention of Black students within PWIs. Furthermore, the research expounds upon the challenges encountered by first-generation students, accentuating the pivotal role of campus resources. The inclusion of authentic student voices identifies and addresses barriers, offering practical solutions for improvement. The study's policy implications, particularly those stressing community building and peer support, serve as invaluable guidance for stakeholders in higher education decision-making. In essence, this research contributes nuanced insights into the interconnected dimensions of academic and social support, thereby laying the groundwork for informed strategies and policies aimed at enhancing the holistic educational experience for diverse student cohorts.

Conclusion

In summary, this qualitative phenomenological study delves into the critical importance of establishing retention-benefitting, culturally inclusive, and caring spaces for Black students in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Beyond its academic implications, the research significantly influences higher education policy, practice, and institutional approaches. By shedding light on the specific factors that contribute to increased retention rates for Black students within supportive environments, educators and administrators can better understand the challenges these students face and develop tailored interventions to address their unique needs. Moreover, the study emphasizes the pivotal role of cultural inclusivity and care in creating a conducive learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging and positively impacts academic success.

Furthermore, the professional implications of this research extend beyond academia to broader organizational contexts, emphasizing the importance of fostering cultures of care and belonging. Dr. Terrell Strayhorn's advocacy for implementing such practices in workplaces underscores their potential to enhance employee satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being. By prioritizing a sense of belonging and support within organizational settings, businesses and corporations can create environments where individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute effectively.

From a social justice perspective, the implications of this research are profound, particularly given recent changes to affirmative action policies impacting educational inclusivity. The study underscores the need for proactive measures to counter feelings of exclusion and marginalization among Black students, ensuring their continued academic success and integration within PWIs. Moreover, it highlights the imperative of addressing

systemic inequalities within higher education to promote equity and justice for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. In essence, this research serves as a call to action for institutions to prioritize the needs of first-generation Black students and invest in programming that fosters inclusive and empowering environments. Through ongoing evaluation and improvement efforts, institutions can ensure the relevance and effectiveness of their initiatives, ultimately providing all students with an equal opportunity to succeed in higher education.

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Consent Forms

Adult Consent – Exempt Studies

University of Missouri–St. Louis Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Project Title: Who Cares?! Assessing caring relations as a factor of retention of Black students in Higher Education

Principal Investigator(s): Kelly Atkins, Danielle Allen, Kuriston Dunlap, Angela Haywood-Gaskin, Rhonda Lingard, Joel Stancer

Department Name: College of Education

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Terrence Freeman

IRB Project Number: #2096075SL

1. You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research is focused on discovering the true meaning and essential components of caring relationships and their connection to first-generation Black students' success in higher education institutions. The data collected in this research study may compel colleges and universities to implement caring relationships as common practice when interacting with Black students. This is important because Black student retention and persistence are disproportionately lower than their white counterparts at predominantly white institutions.
2. Your participation will consist of a Zoom interview that is expected to last 30-45 minutes. You will be asked questions regarding your perception of care and support received while attending SIUE. Your input will be added to the body of research exploring support services for Black students.
3. For your time and effort, we will be offering compensation in the amount of a \$10 gift card to Starbucks.
4. Participants may experience discomfort while answering interview questions. They will be reminded that they can stop the interview or opt out of the process at any time. There is a loss of confidentiality risk associated with this research. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the data recorded, all information will be coded using unique identifiers and will be stored in one place that is password protected for the duration of the research process.
5. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study.

6. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or withdraw your consent at any time. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or withdraw.
7. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this study. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection) that would lead to disclosure of your data as well as any other information collected by the researcher.
8. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigators, Kelly Atkins, Danielle Allen, Kuriston Dunlap, Angela Haywood-Gaskin, Rhonda Lingard or Joel Stancer, at 314-699-4303 or the Faculty Advisor, Terrence Freeman, at 314-516-4251. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the University of Missouri–St. Louis Office of Research Compliance, at 314-516-5972 or irb@umsl.edu.

Email Correspondence to Participants

Pre-screen Email

Dear (student),

B.L.A.C.K. CASHE is a team of researchers completing a co-authored dissertation in the College of Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. This project will investigate creating a caring culture and its relationship to Black student retention and persistence at a predominately white institution in Higher Education. Your participation will consist of a 30-45 minute interview with two of the researchers from our team. You will be asked questions regarding your perception of care and support that you may have received while attending SIUE. Your input will be added to the body of research exploring support services for Black students. Upon completion of your interview, you will receive a \$10 gift card to Starbucks.

If interested in participating, please complete the following pre-screen survey:

1. Are you a current student at Southern Illinois University- Edwardsville?
2. Are you 18 years of age or older?
3. What year in college are you?
4. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
5. With which of the listed racial identities do you more closely identify? (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White)
6. Are you willing to participate in a 30-45 minute interview with two of the researchers from our team via Zoom?

Thank you in advance for your time and participation.

Sincerely,
Kelly Atkins
Danielle Allen
Kuriston Dunlap
Angela Haywood-Gaskin
Rhonda Lingard
Joel Stancer

Doctoral Candidates, Doctor of Education
University of Missouri-St. Louis
IRB approval# #2096075SL

Rejection Email

Dear (student),

Thank you for your interest in the research study concerning care/support services for Black students at SIUE. At this time, our participant pool is full. We appreciate your willingness to provide feedback for the body of research this study will add to.

If additional seats become available, we will contact you to see if you are still interested in participating. Again, thanks for your time and consideration of this study.

Sincerely,
Kelly Atkins
Danielle Allen
Kuriston Dunlap
Angela Haywood-Gaskin
Rhonda Lingard
Joel Stancer

Doctoral Candidates, Doctor of Education
University of Missouri-St. Louis
IRB approval# #2096075SL

Acceptance Email

Dear (student),

You have been selected as a potential participant because of your student status at SIUE and your self-identification as Black or African American. Participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous.

B.L.A.C.K. CASHE is a team of researchers completing a co-authored dissertation in the College of Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Our project will investigate creating a caring culture and its relationship to Black student retention and persistence at a predominately white institution in Higher Education. You will be asked questions regarding your perception of care and support that you may have received while attending SIUE. The interview is expected to last 30-45 minutes. Upon completion of your interview, you will receive a \$10 gift card to Starbucks.

Please visit this link to schedule Zoom Interview times via Calendly or google calendar, etc.

Interview Link:

<https://calendly.com/blackcashe/interview>

Process:

- 1. Students will be sent the following initial email TODAY (can be adjusted if needed):**

Good afternoon!

We appreciate you taking the time to complete the “BLACK CASHE” pre-screen questionnaire. Based on your classification and willingness to participate, we would like you to share your experiences for our research study. The next step in the process is to schedule a 30-minute interview via Zoom. Please visit this link to schedule your interview: <https://calendly.com/blackcashe/interview>

In the attachments, you will find a copy of the purpose statement, problem statement, and research questions for our research project. You will also have the opportunity to review an ‘informed consent’ form. As a reminder, your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.

We look forward to connecting with you soon!

BLACK CASHE

Flyer Advertisement

**RESEARCH
PARTICIPANTS
NEEDED**
CALLING ALL SOAR STUDENTS

Interested in participating in a research study to share your SIUE experience? We NEED you! Your input will assist with building support services for students. All participants will receive a \$10 gift card to Starbucks.

Rhonda Lingard
Contact Information: Email: BlackCashe.edd@gmail.com
Phone: 314-669-4323

Interview Protocol, Script, & Questions

Interview Protocol:

Our project will investigate creating a caring culture and its relationship to Black student retention and persistence at a predominately white institution in Higher Education. This interview is expected to last 30-45 minutes. You will be asked questions regarding your perception of care and support that you may have received while attending SIUE. Your input will add to the body of research exploring support services for Black students. As a participant, you will receive a \$10 gift card to Starbucks.

Interview Script: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I would like to begin by informing you that participation in this study is voluntary and you can agree to opt out (or skip questions) at any time. Do you mind if we make a recording of our interview today? [YES/NO]. Do you have any questions before we start?

Pre-Screen Interview Questions

1. Are you a current student at Southern Illinois University- Edwardsville?
2. Are you 18 years of age or older?
3. What year in college are you?
4. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
5. With which of the listed racial identities do you more closely identify? (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White)
6. Are you a first-generation college student?
7. Are you eligible to receive the Federal Pell Grant?
8. To which gender identity do you most identify? (Female, Male, Transgender Female, Transgender Male, Gender Variant/Non-Conforming, Prefer Not to Respond)

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe has contributed to your success and persistence in higher education thus far?
2. How do you perceive the diversity of SIUE's campus culture?
3. How do you perceive "care" in relation to higher education or your experience at SIUE?
4. Who do you receive care from on campus?
 - a. In what ways do your instructors provide care?
 - b. Other faculty?
 - c. Other staff?
 - d. Administration?
5. What are some things that you believe are important and/or necessary for your success in college?
6. Do you believe this school has those resources?

- a. If so, are they accessible to you?
7. What relationships have you formed with faculty, staff, and/or administration on campus?
 - a. Outside of this program?
8. In what ways can the University or TRIUMPH INITIATIVE program reflect a more caring culture?
9. Is there anything that you'd like to discuss further?

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

B.L.A.C.K. CASHE consists of six Black practitioners that have over seventy years combined work experience in the K-16 educational settings. All have navigated the challenging terrain of higher education and share a similar sentiment as to why we completed successfully. As a result, our research expectations are similar too. We expect Black students to identify access to holistic supports such as tutoring, mentoring, mental health care, physical health care, advising, coaching, and learning support assistance as key necessities for Black student success.

However, we recognize that we are entering the research process with this bias, and will remain conscientious of it as we interview, analyze, code, and discover emerging themes in our research.

By exploring how creating a “culture of care” influences Black student retention and persistence at predominantly white institutions we will examine current data and literature on Black students in higher education and uncover the ingredients for Black student success at PWI’s.

Pilot Study data

The research team conducted a pilot study to explore the development of a supportive culture and its impact on student retention and persistence at a predominantly white institution. Our main objective was to ensure clarity in our research questions and to gather the specific feedback we sought through the interview process.

Supplemental Tables and Figures

Table 1. Conceptual Framework and Alignment

Care Model and Alignment
<p>Sense of Belonging: This is identified as a critical factor to enhance Black Students' experiences at PWIs</p> <p>Sub-themes: institutional support, social and emotional support, and community cultivation directly relate to how students perceive the care and attention they receive from higher education professionals (RQ1). This theme aligns with RQ2 to illustrate a strong sense of belonging fostered through various forms of support, can positively influence college persistence and retention. fostered through various forms of support, can positively influence college persistence and retention.</p>
<p>Mentorship and Guidance: Mentors are instrumental to the success of Black students.</p> <p>Sub-themes: trust, rapport building, and culturally relevant mentorship highlight the dynamics of caring relationships (RQ1). These sub-themes suggest that mentorship goes beyond academic advice, encompassing emotional support and cultural understanding. This aligns with RQ2 to demonstrate that effective mentorship, characterized by trust and cultural relevance, can significantly impact students' decisions to persist and succeed in their academic endeavors.</p>
<p>Access to Campus Resources: The university provides convenient and high-quality campus resource to meet the diverse needs of Black students.</p> <p>Sub-themes involving the availability of institutional support networks and culturally responsive resources indicate the breadth of care provided by higher education professionals (RQ1). The linkage with RQ2 is evident here too, as the presence of supportive and inclusive resources can directly influence student engagement, satisfaction, and their decision to remain at the institution.</p>
<p>Alignment with Research Questions</p> <p>RQ1 (Perception of Caring Relationships: The conceptual framework emphasizes that the perception of caring relationships is multi-dimensional, encompassing not just academic support but also emotional, social, and cultural aspects of support. Each main theme and its sub-themes contribute to painting a comprehensive picture of how Black students perceive these relationships.</p> <p>RQ2 (Influence on Persistence and Retention: The framework shows that caring relationships, as perceived through various supports and resources, have a tangible impact on students' persistence and retention. The sense of belonging, effective mentorship, and access to adequate resources collectively enhance student commitment and satisfaction, key indicators of successful college retention.</p>

Figure 1. Six-phase Thematic Analytic Process

Figure 1

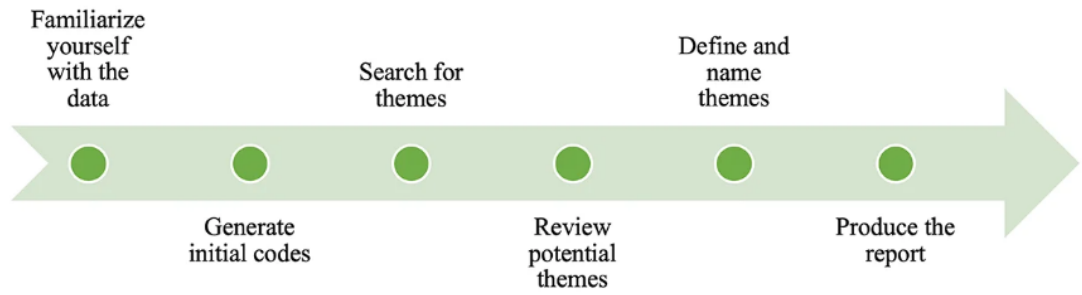
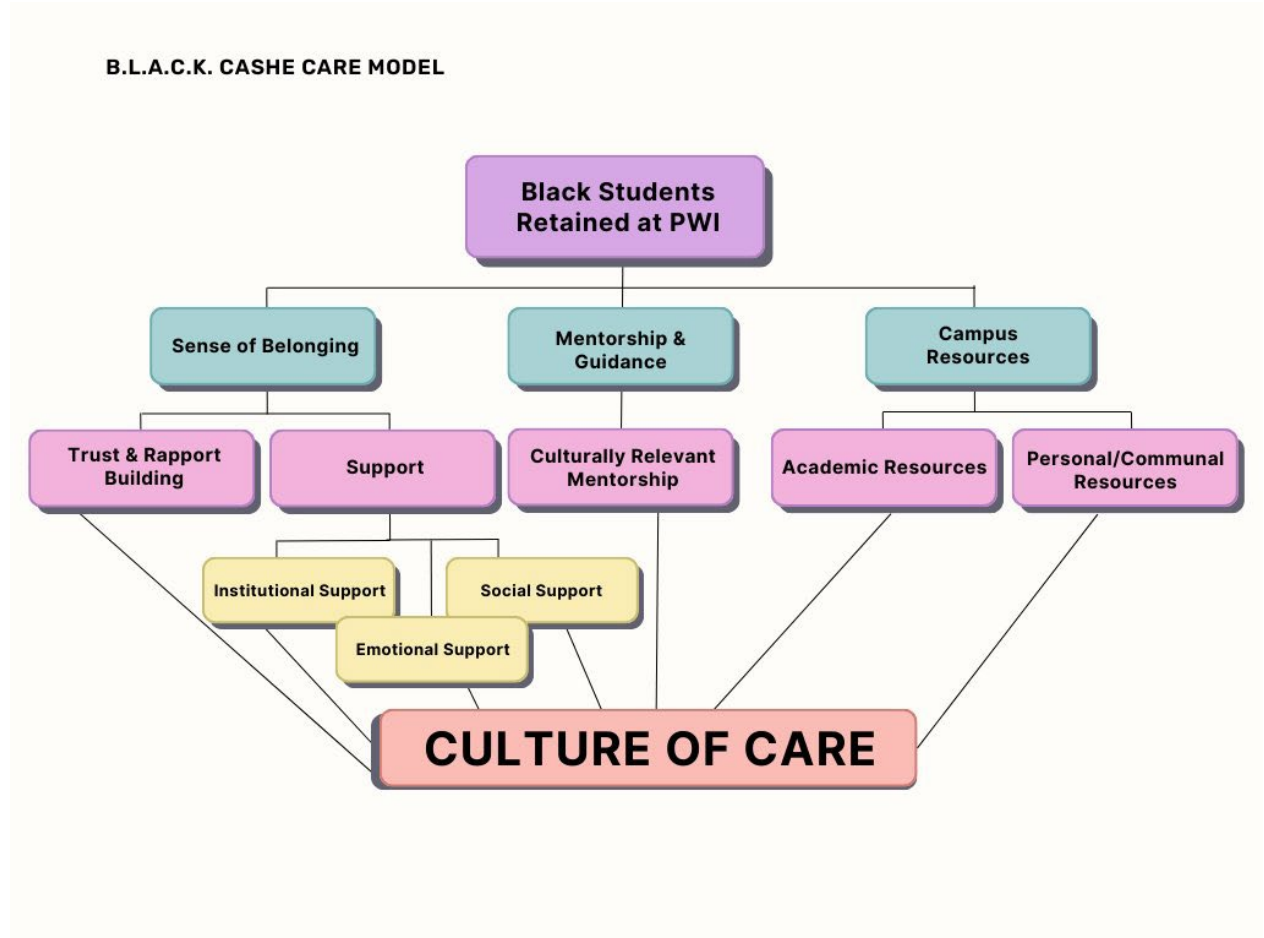


Figure1: Six-phase Thematic Analytic process (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012)

Figure 2. B.L.A.C.K. CASHE Conceptual Framework



Demographic Information of Participants

The participants for this study will be recruited from a student retention program known as Triumph Initiative on the campus of Area Western College. Participants must be 18 years or older, a minority student, and self-identify as Black to qualify for this study.

Relying on the participants' responses, the research team will make attempts to reflect gender, diversity, and student classifications for this study. Participants who are under 18 years old will not be included in the study. The targeted number of participants the research team hopes to interview is 20. This will be enough participants to answer our research questions.