ABSTRACT

Mission Critical: A Qualitative Study on Improving Graduation Success for First-generation, Black Students at Public Universities

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The United States is the wealthiest nation on the planet yet thirty-seven million live in abject poverty (International Monetary Fund, 2022). The Black community, which represents 8.5 million of this population, is experiencing a perpetual cycle of poverty and the lowest reported family income compared to other racial or ethnic groups (Caliendo, 2021; Creamer et al., 2022). These inequities perpetuate long-reaching problems in society including limiting the workforce, expanding wealth gaps, growing public health concerns, and even the criminal justice system (Chetty et al., 2020; Peterson & Mann, 2020). To break the cycle of poverty and prevent secondary societal ramifications, education is key (Allen et al., 2018; de Brey et al., 2019). While universities successfully attracted first-generation Black students, graduation rates for this group are the lowest of all student populations (Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018). One factor, the hidden curriculum, which includes all unwritten rules, policies, and procedures of academic institutions (Pratt et al., 2019) creates and perpetuates social inequities, especially for Black students (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018).
This qualitative single case study with embedded units gave voice to the first-generation, Black students at a public university. Through focus groups and interviews, participants offered first-hand experiences of navigating hidden curricula. Student observations and record reviews offered additional context to further understand this complex problem. Through qualitative analysis of the data, themes emerged illuminating three findings impacting first-generation, Black student graduation rates.

The first finding is that the students did not feel understood by university faculty or staff, therefore they did not feel like they belonged. Next, the students expressed a need for support systems throughout their post-secondary education journey. Finally, campus culture must align with the needs of the students to prevent cultural dissonance. These findings should provoke interest in university policymakers responsible for funding and managing campus culture as well as those responsible for student recruiting and retention. As future inbound students shift toward first-generation, minority students, college policymakers must consider changes to the improve graduation rates of first-generation, Black students.
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HBCU: Historical Black Colleges and Universities

PWI: Predominantly White Institution

STP: Student Transition Program
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My mother once taught me that the two most powerful words in this world are Thank You. I have kept that lesson in all that I do and will offer a few heartfelt thank you. First and foremost, I thank my Heavenly Father, in whom all things are possible.

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“Jesus said to him, ‘If you can believe? All things are possible for one who believes.’”

—Mark 9:23
DEDICATION

To my mother and father, the late Theodore and Thelma Hubbard. Two wonderful and loving people who encourage their children to keep the faith, to keep reaching higher, do good for your neighbor, and to keep God at the center of all you do. Without them, this dream could never have occurred. Love you mom, Love you dad…
CHAPTER ONE

Background and Needs Assessment

Introduction

According to the International Monetary Fund (2022), the advanced economy of the United States makes it the wealthiest nation on the planet, yet there are over thirty-seven million citizens living in abject poverty in the U.S. (Creamer et al., 2022). The U.S. Census Bureau (2021) reported that over 8.5 million Black American families lived at or below the poverty line. Tamir (2020) reported that the Black American population in 2020 was 47 million. Caliendo (2021) and Creamer et al. (2021) found that over 19% of the Black population lives at or below the poverty line and that this race represents the largest race in the United States living in poverty. While all poverty, regardless of race, is terrible, 19% of the total Black people living in poverty continues to create a disparity in economic opportunities for a single race (Winship et al., 2021). This disparity has adverse ramifications on employment opportunities, wealth accumulation, economic mobility, health, and even indirectly in the American criminal justice system (Chetty et al., 2020).

Amongst the historical racial inequalities that have persisted in the United States is the lack of economic mobility in the Black community. Throughout this research, the adverse impact of poverty and its debilitating impact, particularly on the Black population, demonstrates just how damaging poverty is to the success of Black students in higher education and the overall economic and social mobility of an entire group of the American population. Through the lens of education, income, home ownership, and long-term fiscal well-being describe the pervasive inequalities between Blacks and their White
counterparts are documented. The cost of these inequities significantly impacts the nation’s economic footing and long-term growth potential. Researching the inequalities, Peterson and Mann (2020) concluded that between 2000 and 2020, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would have seen a 16 trillion-dollar improvement. Additionally, they noted that given the same educational opportunities, Black household incomes could increase by 90 billion.

The disparities found in the financial standings are the underpinning of the perpetual cycle of poverty, preventing Black people from achieving wealth parity. Higher education is recognized as the most expeditious path toward equality. From the Morrill Land-Grants Act of 1862, which laid the foundations for the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Black American’s pursuit of higher education continues to be the balm that lessens the sting of poverty (Allen et al., 2018; Redden, 2020; Winship et al., 2021). The years between 2009–2019 saw remarkable enrollment numbers of first-generation Black youth into higher education (de Brey et al., 2019). Despite higher education’s tremendous success in the enrollment of Black students, higher attrition rates continue to jeopardize their economic advancement.

Statement of the Problem

At alarming rates, first-generation, Black students leave higher education before earning a bachelor’s degree. The Digest of Education Statistics, published by National Center for Education Statistics (de Brey et al., 2019), reported an 8% increase in Black enrollment between 2000–2018. Even so, these same students are failing to complete their education, realize new opportunities, and break the perpetual cycle of poverty.
The statistics for first-generation Black college students are even grimmer. Not only are they dropping out at higher rates than their majority peers, but those that persevere also take longer to graduate, six years on average. The American Council on Education (McFarland et al., 2018) reported that nearly 15% of annual undergraduate enrollment are first-generation Black students. The National Center for Education Statistics (Taylor et al., 2020) longitudinal study of four cohorts of students reinforced the Department of Education (McFarland et al., 2018) findings on enrollment and highlighted addressed the more significant problem of low graduation rates. The class of 2019 graduated only 197 thousand of the 2.7 million Black students that started college four years earlier. Consistently, the class of 2020 saw only 196 thousand Black students graduate out of 2.5 million who enrolled four years earlier. What is evident in these studies is that while first-generation Black students are enrolling in post-secondary education, there is an alarming number of these new collegians who are not earning a bachelor’s degree. This data demonstrated a 30% decline in graduation rates for these two cohorts. Cross-referencing the National Center for Education Statistics data (Taylor et al., 2020) with the Education Data Initiative (Hanson, 2022) and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Causey et al., 2022) continued to illuminate the dwindling number of Black people graduating with bachelor’s degrees. If the gap persists, the dream of prosperity and equity for yet another generation of Black people will be lost. Although there are many contributing factors to this complex problem of graduation rates in the first-generation Black student body, one of them is hidden curriculum.
A hidden curriculum includes expectations, beliefs, values, and assumptions that are missing from the written curricula, institutional instructions, policies, and procedures (Dreeben, 1967; Jackson, 1968; Pratt et al., 2019). This hidden curriculum is found in informal instruction and within the academic institutional culture which creates and perpetuates social inequities in education, especially for Black students (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). In fact, a hidden curriculum hinders all first-generation students (Gable, 2021). Like to arriving in a foreign country, first-generation students face learning new social and organizational structures, mores, and norms, as well as a new language unique to academia. When parents or older siblings have completed the academic journey, they can share their experiential knowledge which acts as scaffolding for the new student. This familial guidance can offer insight into a hidden curriculum and extend a significant advantage for the new student, allowing them to focus on academics instead of interpreting the complex environment of the university (Stephens et al., 2015). This familial relationship and legacy knowledge facilitate the chances of graduation.

Due in part to racial stigma and stereotyping Black collegians perceive their race to be a hurdle to academic success due to generational institutional belief that the marginalized are less skilled in the requirements for achieving successful graduation outcomes (Antonelli et al., 2020; Dunlosky, 2013; Goodman & Cook, 2019; Johnson, 2020). Mwangi et al. (2018) suggested that the 21st-century racial climate further exacerbates those racial and ethnic fissures making the climate on university campuses even more daunting for the Black collegian. These elements of race and stereotyping are ingredients found in hidden curricula by virtue of the campus culture.
Understanding the impact of a hidden curriculum on the graduation rates of Black collegians is required and is central to this research. If this hidden curriculum is contributing to the current attrition rates, there are opportunities to find viable solutions to improve first-generation students’ graduation rates. Doing so will positively perpetuate upward mobility for the marginalized (Chatelain, 2018; Gable, 2021).

**Literature Review**

Student retention in higher education continues to engender great discussion and debate. Two primary individual factors emerged from the literature regarding retention: personal-psychological dispositions and the factors impacting the individual’s environment. Scholars like Rossman and Kirk (1970) and Spady (1970) offered factors drawn from their longitudinal studies to understand the alarmingly high dropout rates among first-year students in higher education. From the two studies two themes emerged, a student’s psychological disposition alone, for example personality, and motivations, and the student’s intellectual disposition determine a student’s ability to succeed in higher education (Rossmann & Kirk, 1970; Spady, 1970). Biddle et al. (1987) concluded that the three psychological tenants of individual standards, personal attitudes, and self all impact the student’s decision to stay or to depart college prior to attaining a degree. Hence, the social psychologists, Spady (1970), Tinto (2017), and Bean and Eaton (2001) suggested examining the psychological disposition of first-generation Black students independently of the institution to understand why they decided to discontinue their higher education journey. This research was in response to that proposed research challenge.

Sociologists such Tinto (2017) and Bean and Eaton (2001) suggested that any understanding of this issue that does not include an analysis of the individual
environmental factors will yield inconclusive findings and conclusions. Tinto’s (2017) seminal work on retention entitled the institutional departure model, is still considered the benchmark for higher education retention research. Tinto’s work posited that the institution must be a part of the retention analysis, unlike the Biddle et al. (1987) social psychology conclusion. This conclusion asserted the variables that a university represents, such as campus culture, social integration, norms, and traditions, all impact the student’s decision to continue or discontinue their post-secondary education (Biddle et al., 1987). Tinto (2017) concluded that there are two environmental factors having an impact on student retention. The first environmental factor is the academic system, and the second is the social system. The academic system consists of a formal curriculum for which each student is responsible. The social system consists of those elements of the university culture, including peer groups, faculty interactions, and social networking (Braxton & McClendon, 2019). Tinto’s (2017) description of the social system elements is consistent with the elements of a hidden curriculum, which are discussed in detail later.

In a 2018 study on the retention of first-generation Black college students, Williams et al. (2018) supported Tinto’s (2017) findings and concluded that studying the cultural factors of these collegians is necessary to solve the retention challenge with this group. The study further suggested that educators must holistically approach this retention challenge by examining, observing, and influencing those non-cognitive factors that impact the student’s decision to continue their post-secondary education. These studies identified that while cognitive factors served in the past to understand retention in higher education, a critical element of any retention study must include extensive non-cognitive assessment and evaluation.
Tinto’s (2017) work is vital to this research because he recognized the need to research what he called environmental factors, which today is defined as the hidden curriculum (Cotton et al., 2013). Tinto (2017) recommended that to understand retention in higher education, you must examine the environment the students themselves define as their reality. The seminal work of Urie Bronfenbrenner also informs my research. Bronfenbrenner, a psychologist, developed the Ecological Theory in 1977 to examine human development through the lens of the individual surrounding environment. Bronfenbrenner (1977) provided greater granularity of definition to the varying levels of environments impacting human development.

The following is a compilation of the prominent literature related to the challenges first-generation Black students face when pursuing higher education, including a hidden curriculum. This content offered a review of previous prominent studies, gaps in the literature, and the context supporting the need for my study. I organized the literature review using Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Theory which is the framework for my research. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (1977) advances Tinto’s (2017) Institutional Departure Model by providing granularity to the definition of the environment. I selected this theoretical framework because while suggestions for examining the institutional environment abound, Bronfenbrenner (1977) provided a lens to label and dissect those individual elements that make up the environment. The literature is presented in four parts. First, I analyzed content related to the educational barriers faced by first-generation Black students considering the ecological system prior to attending university. Next, I define and examine the history of the concept of a hidden
curriculum. Then, I introduce the concept of the campus ecosystem analysis. Finally, I describe the ecological macrosystem of the campus experience.

*Microsystem Analysis: Prior to College*

In this section, I reviewed the literature related to barriers impacting first-generation, Black students pursuing higher education resulting from their ecological system of their upbringing. Bronfenbrenner (1977) explained that exposure to environmental norms, accepted patterns, beliefs, society, and culture all influence individual human development. A person’s experience and interactions with the dominant beliefs, cultural patterns and norms, and the political attitudes in their communities in their early years shape their perspective (Navarro et al., 2022; Shelton, 2015). Factors in the microsystem included the elements that directly impacted the individual during their development. The key themes found in the literature review related to the microsystem of their upbringing are used to guide this section: (a) poverty, (b) financial literacy and financial aid, and (c) academic preparedness.

*Poverty.* According to the United States Census Bureau reports, between 2019 and 2021, the population of Black people living at or below the poverty were 18.8%, 19.5%, and 19%, respectively (Creamer et al., 2022; Semega et al., 2021; Shrider et al., 2021). In the three documented years, Black Americans’ poverty rate represented 12% of the entire population in the United States. These Census Bureau reports also pointed out the alarming inconsistencies in income with the median household income for Black families at $45,438, while Hispanics, Whites, and Asian Americans fared better at $56,113, $76,057, and $98,174 respectively. Collectively these census reports are consistent in their findings regarding the social and economic mobility disadvantages
experienced by the Black American population. Poverty is pervasive in this research because while it is a persistent malady for all Americans, it is a paralyzing plague for Black Americans, the largest sector of the American population living at or below the poverty line (Azih, 2017). Understanding the pernicious power of poverty amongst first-generation Black Americans is fundamental to this research because ignoring it defeats the ability to understand the essence of this research; how does the university ecosystem impact first-generation Black American student success?

The late U.S. President George H. W. Bush once said that education may be central to decreasing poverty (NYU Dispatch, 2018). Unfortunately, the perpetual cycle of poverty in the United States has and continues to be one of the most significant dilemmas American society faces. Breaking this perpetual cycle of poverty has been a significant yet persistent challenge since Lyndon Johnson declared a “war on poverty” in 1964. Black students are the focus of this study as they are the individuals positioned to break this perpetual cycle of poverty upon graduation.

Pew Research recognized the dynamic of poverty as a factor in successful graduation outcomes of first-generation Black college students (Tamir, 2021). This study correlated bachelor’s degree attainment and poverty rates amongst all ethnic groups of American society. Tamir (2021) analyzed 9.1 million students and reported that Black Americans over the age of 25 only 15% had earned a postsecondary degree while those over 25 in the White community boasted graduation rates of 64%. While correlation does not equal causation, it is alarming that the Black community is the largest ethnic group living at or below the poverty line in the United States and has the lowest college
graduation rates in the nation (Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Roska & Whitley, 2017).

A postsecondary education is in part key to attaining economic mobility. A lack of economic mobility is the leading cause for the high poverty rates amongst Black Americans (Chaudry et al., 2016; Haider, 2021; Tamir, 2021). Education remains a crucial weapon, acting as the crucial equalizer in the war on poverty. Individuals who complete college are more likely to create avenues to economic mobility for themselves and their future generations (Haider, 2021; Tamir, 2021) which makes this research crucial.

This cycle of poverty is not only a problem for the Black community, but also for our nation. The cost of these inequities in wealth, education, employment and opportunity in the Black community significantly impacted the nation’s economic footing and long-term growth potential. Beyer (2022) documented that the unemployment rate for Black Americans was 9.2% while White Americans’ unemployment rate was 5.7% for the same reported period. Similarly, Beyer (2022) found income inequalities between the two groups, explaining “Black households earn 62 cents for every dollar earned by White households. Annualized, the gap between Black ($46,600) and White ($74,912) median household incomes is about $30,000” (Beyer, 2022, p. 3). Additionally, Beyer (2022) found that wealth accumulation reflected an even greater alarm in racial inequalities, with the median wealth of Black American families reported as one-eighth of that of White Americans. Similarly, Peterson and Mann (2020) concluded that between 2000 and 2020, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) lost 6 trillion dollars because of the persisting racial inequities affronted to the Black population. These disparities underpin the perpetual
cycle of poverty, preventing Black Americans from achieving wealth parity and upward social mobility.

Understanding the ramifications of poverty is essential to this study because it is a characteristic of the demographic entering university studies (Irwin et al., 2021). The Center for First-Generation Student Success, a National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) publication, reported that 1 in 3 students in 2020 identified as being the first generation in their family to attend college (Whitley et al., 2018). Among the myriad challenges facing first-generation students is their limited financial knowledge, attributed to their family’s position in poverty (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2021). This poverty experienced by first-generation Black students prevents them from learning money management, the nuances of lending programs to finance education, and the ramifications of debt. This positions them at a disadvantage when pursuing and completing their college pursuits.

Financial literacy and financial aid. It has become expensive to pursue and acquire a college degree. Davis et al. (2019) and Snyder et al. (2018) revealed that the cost of attending a public university college between 2000–2020 has risen by over 60%. In fact, the average cost of obtaining a 4-year college degree sometimes exceeds $400,000 after the accrual of interest on all loans and the associated fixed and recurring fees (Davis et al., 2019). While this is a challenge for all students wishing to obtain a bachelor’s degree, it is a devastating barrier for low-income, first-generation students (Furquim et al., 2017; Gutter & Copur, 2011; Montalto et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2018; Willis, 2017). What makes the impact exponential is that many of these students are from families lacking the financial resources to fund a college education (Mitchell et
al., 2019). For college students who come from financially unstable households finding and understanding the realities of financing their college education is a significant stressor which negatively impacts graduation outcomes.

In two recent studies, Mishra (2020) and Thiem and Dasgupta (2022) posited that navigating the complex world of higher education financing is one of the most difficult challenges facing the new collegian. The lack of financial literacy in this population of college students creates significant fiscal insecurity during the first years of their postsecondary journey (Davis et al., 2019; Hanson, 2022; Lim et al., 2014; Robb, 2017). Limited family financial support, knowledge, and expertise make navigating financial aid programs even more challenging (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Montalto et al., 2019; Furquim et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2015). A critical factor for student success is understanding how financial aid works. Unfortunately, without financial literacy, students simply sign up for educational loans without the awareness of their options or understanding of the long-term impact of their decisions.

To alleviate the stress and anguish resulting from financing higher education, Congress passed the Higher Education Act of 1965 to offer financial assistance in the form of grants, scholarships, and low interest loans (Fuller, 2014). Fuller pointed out that the 1972 re-authorization of the Higher Education Act specifically outlined provisions to support those students with the most significant financial needs. This act requires congressional reauthorization every five years. The last congressional comprehensive reauthorization of the Act occurred in 1988 (Congressional Research Service, 2018; Espinoza et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2018). Since 1988 the Act has received temporary extensions with limited capacity to support low-income families’ ability to
finance the cost of higher education. The reauthorization is significant because a central portion of the Act funds the Pell Grant (Congressional Research Service, 2018). The Pell Grant is not required to be paid back by the student or the parents. Legislators created this grant specifically to cover the costs of post-secondary education for students of poverty to facilitate breaking that perpetual cycle of poverty. As the cost of higher education has increased and the lack of a comprehensive congressional reauthorization, the Pell Grant failed to keep up with the rising cost of post-secondary education and, by 2017, covered just 28% of the total cost of higher education (Protopsaltis & Parrott, 2017). While this gap in college costs and the value of the grant is a challenge, there is a larger concern for students without financial literacy.

The availability of grants and lower interest loan programs to offset college costs offer some options for those with limited incomes. Unfortunately, students without financial literacy do not have the knowledge or family support to advise them on these matters (Furquim et al., 2017). According to Perna et al. (2017), a lack of financial literacy leads some students to take out unscrupulous, high interest student loans. Not only does the student take out high-interest loans but their parents also take out high-interest, federally unsubsidized loans (Student Debt Burden, 2021; Voon 2016). Festa (2019), Chetty et al. (2020), and Winship et al. (2021) each explained the compounding impact these decisions have on family members living at or below the poverty line and the additional pressure on the student to succeed in their college pursuits.

Poor loan decisions not only negatively influence their long-term financial outcomes and path to economic mobility, but also their academic success. Students in this group drop out at higher rates due to their inability to navigate the financial aid
environment (Furquim et al., 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Gutter & Copur, 2011; Montalto et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2015). Research by Davis (2019), Mitchell et al. (2019), and Voon (2016) made it clear that financing higher education is a challenge that is both a social and psychological barrier adversely impacting first-generation Black students in their pursuit of degree completion. The impoverished upbringing results in a lack of financial literacy. The lack of financial literacy leads to poor decisions in selecting financial aid.

**Academic preparedness.** Academic preparedness for the postsecondary experience is a significant theme identified in the reviewed literature. Welton and Martinez (2014) stated that K–12 education is critical to a student’s cognitive and non-cognitive integration and ultimate success at university level. Cognitive attributes include those that allow a student to acquire knowledge while non-cognitive attributes include motivation, perseverance, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and conscientiousness (Atherton, 2014; Dweck et al., 2014; Rosen et al., 2010). Stable learning environments that provide appropriate academic challenges at the K–12 education level shape the student for future success. Poverty again positions this population at a disadvantage as their communities lack the basic resources found in other public-school districts. Bryant (2015), Davidson et al. (2020), Thiem and Dasgupta (2022), and Walton and Cohen (2007) all posited that K–12 education in neighborhoods serving marginalized students fails to prepare them for post-secondary endeavors.

Thiem (2022) documented how funding for K–12 public education in the United States is sourced from the local schools’ district local tax base. In more affluent school districts, public schools benefit from revenue sourcing to pay for experienced teachers at
top salaries and reduced class sizes facilitating students’ ability to navigate the curriculum successfully. Bryant (2015) found that school districts with high minority populations lacked high school curriculum to prepare these marginalized students with the necessary foundational learning to succeed at university level academics. The Department of Education identified the curriculum disparity between K–12 school districts with large Black and Latino student populations (Office for Civil Rights, 2016). These school districts do not offer advanced classes, significantly lowering the available opportunities for students to learn topics such as calculus, physics, chemistry, algebra II, and other college preparatory offerings. Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020), Oyserman and Lewis (2017), and Thiem and Dasgupta (2022) documented the science and math deficiencies in secondary education, attributing the gap to the limited financial resources allocated for these economically depressed school districts.

These deficiencies at the secondary level led to academic challenges in higher education. Mishra (2020) found that students from economically challenged school districts faced significant academic and psychological challenges in higher education. The Department of Education (Office for Civil Rights, 2016) found that school districts in the United States with higher Black and Latino student populations had fewer higher-level mathematics and science courses in general. Additionally, the same study found that even in the more affluent school districts where advanced classes were offered, Black students enrolled at an alarmingly low rate (Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Without knowledge of the college level academic requirements, students and their families make poor choices of the limited class options available to them. Additionally, they are unaware of resources available to prepare their children for college pursuits.
(Welton, 2013). Bryant (2015) posited that Black students in the public-school systems require improved curricula, more experienced teachers, and guidance counselors who can help to alleviate these academic shortfalls. This support is critical to ensure the necessary cognitive and non-cognitive integration to develop the attitudes and skills to position these students for success at the college level.

Students need cognitive and non-cognitive development in their K–12 experience. Without the proper exposure to challenging curricula and supportive environments, students lack self-efficacy, avoid setting goals, and have low levels of commitment because they lack confidence in their ability to succeed (Dweck et al., 2014; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Oyserman and Lewis (2017) reported that cognitive deficiencies negatively impacted the student’s motivation and led to psychological distress for Black students, resulting in low self-efficacy. This blow to their confidence is magnified when they are admitted to a college and then find they are not prepared.

Those that do manage to navigate the tumultuous process and arrive at college, find themselves ill-prepared and struggle to succeed. To better understand the academic preparedness barriers, Martin (2017) examined the lived experiences of 144 first-year collegians, one-third of whom were students of color, who decided not to continue their education. Martin (2017) found that 48% of the studied population stated academic demands and lack of preparedness as factors in the decision not to continue their higher education aspirations. This lack of preparedness presented as a barrier to a student’s self-efficacy, motivation, and perseverance (Dweck et al., 2014) ultimately impacting their sense of belonging in college (Strayhorn, 2018) resulting in the escalating college dropout rates.
Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education

The depth and breadth of theories on the construct of a hidden curriculum have been the subject of scholarly inquiry from the early works of Dreeben (1967), Jackson (1968), Giroux and Pena (1979), Gable (2021), and others. Scholars such as Dewey (1999) and Freire (1970) also indirectly added to this socialization concept of the hidden curriculum in their writings. In this research, the theories and concepts of the hidden curriculum are vital as they provide a lens through which a greater understanding of the process of student socialization in higher education’s ecosystem, specifically those first-generation Black students as they navigate their post-secondary journey.

The definition of a hidden curriculum in higher education has remained consistent with the historical nature of the term: it is the informal instruction a higher education student receives outside the formal instruction of the university curriculum (Cotton et al., 2013). The hidden curriculum exists within the campus experience, not formally documented within the policies, procedures, syllabi, or training content. Based on this definition, hidden curriculum falls into the macrosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) model. Cotton et al. (2013) suggested that understanding a hidden curriculum in higher education requires a holistic analysis and understanding of the dynamics of campus culture, the university’s instruction choices, and the instructors selected to teach. To understand the influences that are preventing the success of first-generation Black students, the university is explored as an ecological system.

A hidden curriculum is an educational remnant of old philosophies and thoughts designed to control the masses of society and ensure all persons remain in their respective places in society’s order (Anyon, 1980; Royce, 2015). Throughout history, a hidden curriculum in education has played a part in segregating individuals and driving their
career and success trajectories (Pratt et al., 2019). From the late twentieth century, a hidden curriculum served as an educational forcing measure designed to give meaning and purpose to education (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Pratt et al., 2019; Sarikartal, 2020). Historically, stereotypes for Black people included the belief they were academically inferior and required segregated areas of study, justifying their respective and pragmatic roles in society (Taylor et al., 2019). Quite simply, the intentional controlling nature of the hidden curriculum helped support the oppression of early Black Americans.

John Dewey’s (1999) revered child-centered educational philosophy is an early example of how the use of a hidden curriculum asserted control over the masses of society to ensure they remained in their respective places in society. Margonis (2009) found that Dewey’s primordial instincts reinforced the hidden curriculum’s principles stating Dewey reported “favorably upon a form of vocational training that was segregated, narrow, nonacademic, and designed to adapt students to the existing racial order” (p. 18). While Dewey’s educational philosophy courageously revolutionized public education in the United States, the construct of that philosophy still holds the paradigms of social racial order today (Dewey, 1999; Dill, 2007; Kridel, 2018; Margonis, 2009).

As late as 1950, the law of the land did not allow Black Americans to attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The nation’s segregation laws, and the Jim Crow apparatus precluded Black Americans from pursuing higher education in general. The 1950 U.S. Supreme Court case of McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents challenged the segregation laws used by higher education institutions in refusing both the access and pursuit of a degree at a PWIs (1950). In 1973, the National Association for the
Advancement of Colored People filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia to challenge the continuing use of segregation policy in higher education throughout the country (Adams v. Richardson, 1990). In both cases, the courts ruled in favor of the plaintiff to rid the nation of the segregation measures hindering Black Americans from attaining higher education. Segregation represented the most remarkable example of how the use of a hidden curriculum controlled and ensured Black Americans remained in their place. Even more poignantly, the right for Black Americans to attend desegregated PWIs was codified in law in 1971.

As previously noted, Thiem’s (2022) research documented how the school district tax base is the funding for K–12 education in the United States. When funding is limited, so are the curricula, the availability of experienced teachers due to salaries, after school programs, and other factors included in a hidden curriculum. Mishra (2020) found that students from economically challenged school districts faced significant academic and psychological challenges in higher education. Students from these poorer school districts experienced limited curriculum, preventing them from establishing academic footing. Limited resources equate to less experienced teachers, larger classrooms, and limited career counseling vital for students to prepare for their respective post-secondary education (Mishra, 2020; Thiem, 2022). Exploring the evolution of the hidden curriculum and how it continues to shape the social construct of universities is necessary to understand how first-generation Black American collegians are impacted is vital to my research.

Tinto (2017) posited that to understand the matriculation challenges in higher education, researchers must consider the environment first-generation, Black students
navigate. Academic and cultural integration is crucial to student post-secondary success. These university students enter the storied halls of higher education with a significant deficit in the traditions, customs, and norms found on campus. They find themselves ill prepared and psychologically, emotionally, and physically alone in this sea of unknowns (Bensimon, 2018; Mondisa et al., 2021). Higher education’s hidden curriculum contributed to this confluence of unknowns. Mondisa (2021) reported the unknowns of higher education cause a psychological impact on Black undergraduates as they fear perpetuating the stereotypes experienced in their upbringing. Unresolved, these psychological challenges result in Black collegians opting out of the higher education journey (Mondisa, 2021; McCallum et al., 2018).

Racism is a factor included in a hidden curriculum. Garvey (2019) posited that the Black experience is replete with internalized racism. Reinforcing this internalized racism is the constant negative portrayal of Blacks in society (Mondisa, 2021). Whether through typecasting in cinema (Nittle, 2021), or social media’s portrayal of Blacks as super-predators (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2021), the stigma of stereotyping continues to harm the psyche. Kumah-Abiwi (2020) posited that the negative portrayal of Blacks in the media presents one of the most debilitating narratives, adversely impacting members of this group in all age groups and genders.

Oppression and subjugation of a people over a lifetime lay the foundation for the subjugated group to develop self-efficacy issues and develop a sense of denigration towards one’s own racial group (Bolin, 2017; David et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Freire, 1970; Garvey, 2019; Mondisa, 2021). The negativity associated with the Black Lives Matters movement, the high volume of incarcerated Black males, the fractured
Black family unit, and the sting of abject poverty are all factors leading to internalized racism experienced by first-generation Black students (Davis et al., 2019).

Higher education is not divorced from the realities of modern society. This pervasive negative portrayal of Black people in society finds its way into the hidden curriculum of higher education. In fact, Mwangi et al. (2018) suggested that the 21st-century racial climate makes the climate on university campuses even more daunting for the Black collegian. Mondisa (2021) posited those Black students, particularly undergraduates attending PWIs, may experience unintended or intended racism stigmatizing effects through a hidden curriculum. The negative dogma and stereotyping impact the psyche and erode the resiliency of first-generation Black collegians (Brooms, 2017). Because of the exposure to constant a negative narrative, young Black students perceive their race as a hurdle to academic success (Goodman & Cook, 2019) due to the generational institutionalized belief that people of color are less skilled and therefore less likely to achieve successful graduation outcomes (Johnson, 2020; Upchurch, 2020). Understanding this internalized racism is essential to this study because it facilitates a greater understanding of the challenges of Black student integration on campus.

Campbell et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal study finding discriminatory practices, harassment, and microaggressions remain key barriers for Black students in higher education. Kaplan et al. (2018) noted that Black students face discriminatory practices that contribute to disproportionately higher levels of stress. For example, students may experience overt racism in the form of racial slurs in the classroom that go uncorrected, microaggression, and in some cases even physical assault (Anderson & Young, 2020; Ellis et al., 2019). Racism and discrimination are of significant concern
among Black students (DeWitty & Murray, 2020). Despite efforts to increase retention, Black students report continued experiences of White peers questioning their intelligence and value (DeWitty & Murray, 2020). Additionally, microaggressions, which are communicated through behavioral or verbal indignities, are evident through overt and subvert communication (Cook, 1975; Njie-Carr et al., 2020). These experiences reinforce the student’s internalized racism.

Additionally, the literature provided some difficult conclusions regarding racial stereotypes at PWI of higher education related to Black students. These negative societal stereotypes make the process of perceiving a sense of belonging much harder to achieve (Alberton, 2014; Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Roska & Whitley, 2017). Brown et al. (2017) suggested that college students internalize these stereotypes and have false doubts about their self-worth and abilities. These factors impact the psychological footing of these students just beginning their new journey, eroding their tenacity and belief in their ability to succeed.

*Campus Ecological System Analysis*

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory encompassed the norms, accepted patterns, beliefs, society, and culture all influence individual human development. In their upbringing, students become the manifestations of the dominant community beliefs, the societal and cultural patterns and norms, and the political attitudes and ideologies (Navarro et al., 2022; Shelton, 2015). In this section, I describe the ecological systems of microsystem and macrosystem of the campus experience.
Campus microsystem analysis. The first system in Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) theory is the microsystem which encompasses the environmental elements the individual has direct contact with including parents, siblings, teachers, and peers. This level includes bi-directional relationships in which the individuals can influence the beliefs and actions of one another (Shelton, 2015). In the college setting, these relationships would include students, faculty, campus staff, and other key players. Understanding how the new students develop these relationships is critical to answering my research question.

Upon arrival at college, these relationships are critical to helping first-generation Black students feel a sense of belonging (Smith et al., 2020; Suhlmann et al., 2018; Wibrowski et al., 2017). These critical microsystem relationships influence the self-perceptions of the incoming students, either reinforcing or challenging, the paradigms developed in their upbringing. Goodwin (2009) explained the importance of such relationships during times of significant life changes, arguing that resiliency is amplified through such relationships. If students do not make quick connections upon arrival at campus, they are at risk of feeling isolated, excluded, and estranged from the campus culture. Recognizing the need, universities designed programs to attempt to connect with students early in the enrollment process (McFarland et al., 2020). These programs tend to be generic onboarding programs, designed to connect with all new students, rather than meet the needs of any specific group (McFarland et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2019).

Each new student arrives on campus with a unique background, experience, self-perception, and level of resiliency. Because of this, each student experiences the same stimuli but responds to them in their own unique ways, differently than one another (Goodwin, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Creating a welcoming college microsystem for the
new student is necessary to ensure they quickly adapt, develop peer and teacher relationships, and begin to develop a sense of self-worth and belonging (Means et al., 2017; Thiem & Drasgupta, 2022).

*Campus macrosystem analysis.* The campus macrosystem is the social and cultural norms influencing student development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In higher education, the campus macrosystem consists of the campus culture involving day-to-day interactions with faculty, peers, and social interactions on and off campus (Mwangi et al., 2018). In this section, I examined the student’s sense of belonging on campus through the lens of psychological and emotional student experiences.

The need for belonging is a product of the human psyche’s quest for connectedness and the world we live in (Halse, 2018). Martin (2017), Quaye (2020), and Strayhorn (2018) conducted studies on the Black sense of belonging on college campuses. Each of those studies identified a symbiotic relationship between academic success and a student’s sense of belonging. To understand how barriers impact Black students’ matriculation in higher education, it is vital to know how the student views themself within the campus culture. Walton and Cohen (2019) found socially stigmatized high schoolers had significantly more barriers to overcome due to their apprehension of reliving the negative interactions as they attempt to connect with others in their college years. For the college student, belongingness is the perception of acceptance, being cared for, and having value amidst the campus culture (Halse 2018; Museus et al., 2018; Pratt et al., 2019; Quaye, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019; Weber et al., 2019). This integration is what Allen et al. (2018), Baumeister and Leary (1995), Mwangi et al. (2018), and Strayhorn
(2018) posited as crucial in building the student’s sense of belonging, which is considered vital to academic success.

Quaye (2020) found that race, climate, and culture saturate the university campus, and both internal and external forces influence the university. Permeating the external factors include government policies and historical regional and state dynamics (Quaye, 2020). Affirmative action and immigration policy are examples of government policies that have positive and negative psychologically influential factors on the university campus’s culture and climate. Tichavakunda (2020) concluded that Black Americans in PWIs experienced challenging cultural exchanges due in part to the sense of isolation, the university’s historical positions on race, and the university’s position on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

While PWIs have evolved over the decades, since the 1950 Supreme Court decision on *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, the history of less than friendly environments towards Black Americans on university campuses lingers, however so mildly. In a 2019 TED Talk on diversity in higher education, Dr. Anthony Jack of Harvard Graduate School of Education posited that Black Americans’ access to higher education does not equate to inclusion in higher education. The point Jack (2019) made underscored the current plight of Black collegians on PWIs. The shortfalls in integration lead to cultural dissonance, the disconnect between the Black student’s culture, the culture of their upbringing, and the university campus culture (Jackson, 2019; Quaye, 2020; Tichavakunda, 2020).

For the faction of first-generation Black students, the concept of belonging can be summed up simply in a single question: Do I belong here? Many students in this group
are in an environment completely foreign to them, both academically and socially (2014; Mega et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2019; Weber et al., 2019). First-generation Black students had limited opportunities to develop and understand peers or professors who did not look like them (Edwards & Ross, 2018; Mega et al., 2014). First-generation Black students are hesitant to seek assistance either personally or academically as a result of diminished psychological self-efficacy and their lack of a sense of belonging (Museus et al., 2018; Pratt et al., 2019). These exposures lead to compound social and psychological factors which created additional hurdles in earning a bachelor’s degree.

The metaphysical question of do I belong here is even more poignant for the students representing society’s marginalized citizens (Strayhorn, 2010). The answer to that question consistently surfaced in the literature when researching the impact a hidden curriculum has on the academic success of first-generation, Black students in higher education. Palmer et al. (2014) linked problems with hidden school curricula to declines in first-generation students’ academic success. While the student diversification of higher education continued to progress, the number of graduates continues a downward spiral (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). Marginalized students struggle with the perceived notion that they are not worthy of being collegians on the PWI campuses and the effects of the hidden curriculum heighten this perception (Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). For marginalized students, a hidden curriculum is an institutional enabler that reinforces prevailing social inequalities (Stephens et al., 2015). Freeman et al. (2021) articulated the need for greater cultural understanding as their research examined Black students who transferred from PWIs to HBCUs. The transferring students spoke of the sense of being appreciated and respected as academicians instead of being a member of a marginalized group who,
without the help of affirmative action, would not be at a PWIs at all (Freeman et al., 2021; Gasman et al., 2017).

Synthesis of Literature

In this literature review, I examined existing research on attrition in higher education pertaining to first-generation Black students. While the attrition of this population group is alarmingly high (de Brey et al., 2019), the literature shows that the problem of attrition in higher education has been festering since the 1960s (Biddle, 1987; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 2017) with few discernable solutions. Academic discussions on how and what to research helped shape and develop the theoretical frameworks to understand this complex retention issue (Aljohani, 2016). Spady (1970), Tinto (2017), and Bean and Eaton (2001) suggested examining the psychological disposition of first-generation Black students independently of the institution to understand why they discontinued their pursuit of higher education. This research was in response to that proposed research challenge.

Scholarly work concluded that attaining a bachelor’s degree can break the cycle of poverty (Bailey & Duquette, 2014; Raj, 2020) by providing social and economic mobility upward for scores of Black families (Chaudry et al., 2016; Peterson & Mann, 2020). Degree attainment is an economic booster to the US economy through realized productive employment (International Monetary Fund, 2022; Peterson & Mann, 2020). Nevertheless, the problem of high attrition of first-generation Black students remained higher in 2022 than it has ever been in the nation’s history (McFarland et al., 2018; Hanson, 2022; Irwin et al., 2021). This literature review showed that in understanding the
complex issue of Black student attrition, a greater emphasis must be placed on the environment and culture the individual exists within.

While scholars have concluded how and what to examine to find an understanding of the complex issue of retention (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Dias, 2022; Mishra, 2020; Strayhorn, 2018; Tinto, 2017) and researchers have conducted numerous studies (Hilts et al., 2018; Lane, 2016; Samuelson & Litzler, 2015; Williams et al., 2018) the attrition problem remains for this group of Americans. This complex problem represents a gap in the literature requiring further research.

Theoretical Framework

To break the perpetual cycle of poverty, higher education, more specifically, earning a college degree, continues to provide the most viable means of upward mobility, lifting the economically and socially marginalized citizens of the United States, most of whom are poor and Black (Allen et al., 2018; Chetty et al., 2020; Winship et al., 2021). However, while the ability to commence the post-secondary educational journey for first-generation Black students is good, their ability to graduate remains elusive (de Brey et al., 2019; Espinoza et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2020; Snyder et al., 2018). The purpose of my research is to understand how the hidden curriculum impacts the graduation rates of first-generation Black students. I collected data from the lived experiences of five first-generation Black students currently enrolled at a PWI. I analyzed the collected data using Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Theoretical framework.

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a twentieth-century developmental psychologist, posited that to understand the complexities of human development, one must understand the environment surrounding the individual (Shelton, 2015). Human development is not a
confined individual endeavor; instead, Bronfenbrenner (1977) concluded that human development is an endeavor that has both social and physical influential factors. The framework offered to understand these influential factors is what Bronfenbrenner documented as the ecological theory.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (1977) included five distinct systems. Each of these systems represents an area of the environment that has a specific influence on the development of the individual. The five systems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) seminal work posited that individual development is shaped and influenced by the social relations the individual experiences from the world around them. In the case of the first-generation Black student, these environmental exposures position the student at an immediate disadvantage upon arrival at the university.

The influence of informal variables on the formal curriculum is significant. For this study, I utilized the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (1977). Bronfenbrenner’s seminal work posits that individual development is shaped and influenced by the social relations the individual experiences from the world around them. Shelton (2015) concluded that the only way to understand an individual holistically, one must understand the environment and the interactions in the ecosystem from which the individual resides. To explain these influential relationships, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory provides a nested model demonstrating how to understand these social relations holistically. The model contains five distinct systems (Figure 1).

Each of the five systems has a specific role in the development of the individual. The five systems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem,
and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). At the center of the model is the individual, and for this research, that individual is a first-generation Black college student. For this student, the first of Bronfenbrenner’s model is the microsystem. Characterizing this system are those factors directly impacting the student (O’Toole et al., 2019). These factors include the student’s daily interactions with parents, friends, and professors. The next system in this model is the mesosystem. The mesosystem is where two or more microsystems interact, such as academic advisors and professors. The next section in this nested system is the exosystem, which describes interactions that indirectly influence the student. An example of the exosystem includes the collegians and the university Board of Visitors, where the two may not meet. However, the influence of the Board of Visitors significantly impacts the student’s interactions on the university campus. The macrosystem follows and represents the social and cultural norms influencing student development. Finally, the role of time in the developing student characterizes the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; O’Toole et al., 2019; Shelton, 2015).

Figure 1. Five systems impacting student development.
My research seeks to understand how the hidden curriculum impacts the graduation rates of first-generation Black university students. I used the ecological theory, with its ecosystem model, as a framework in the critical thinking of this complex issue through open-ended questions and candid conversations with these collegians in a focus group setting (Creswell, 2018). Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) model allowed for a holistic research approach and understanding of the student experiences. Table 1 displays the structure and alignment of the literature review in the context of Bronfenbrenner’s theory.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microsystem</th>
<th>Mesosystem</th>
<th>Exosystem</th>
<th>Macrosystem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Poverty</td>
<td>• Academic preparedness</td>
<td>• Academic success</td>
<td>• Hidden curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial literacy</td>
<td>• Shortfalls in K–12 curriculum</td>
<td>• Sense of belonging</td>
<td>• Campus culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economic stability</td>
<td>• Paying for College</td>
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<td>• Family support</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Counselors/ Mentors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• First Generation Student</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion: Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of my research was to understand how the university ecosystem impact first generation Black student success. The findings of this study inform all the stakeholders at Eagle University. The study informs the university faculty in examining the campus environment that aligns with the growing multicultural student body, including first-generation Black). The study informs the university President and his cabinet, who make decisions and take actions toward the health of the university culture and climate. This research informs the university’s Board of Visitors, which is
responsible for allocating resources to increase programs supporting the marginalized students enrolled. Lastly, the largest stakeholder informed by this research is that of marginalized students, who dare to dream of lifting themselves from the clutches of poverty. The following chapter outlines the qualitative single case study with embedded units design and framework to answer the research question: How does the university ecosystem impact first-generation, Black student success?
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Introduction: Research Questions

My review of existing literature found that systemic poverty in the United States has economically and socially trapped over seven million members of the Black community, representing 19% of the total number of Americans living at or below the poverty line (Caliendo, 2021; Semega et al., 2021). Education, specifically post-secondary education, is reported as the best way to break the cycle of poverty and enhance the upward mobility of this population group (Chetty et al., 2020; Paschall et al., 2018; Winship et al., 2021). As reported in the previous chapter, the number of first-generation Black youth embarking on post-secondary education between 2010 and 2019 exceeded enrollment from 1980 to 2000 (de Brey, 2019, McFarland et al., 2020). Unfortunately, over the same period, the growing attrition rates of first-generation Black university students at predominantly White institutions (PWI) have reached the point where this group has the lowest graduation rates (de Brey et al., 2019; Espinoza et al., 2019). This complex issue of attrition, if left unexamined, a cycle of perpetual poverty for this group will continue unabated (Gershenfeld et al., 2015; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022; Winship et al., 2021). The nation’s full economic potential will remain unrealized due to the lack of productivity of many languishing in poverty (Peterson & Mann, 2020).

My research question asks: How does the university ecosystem impact first-generation Black student success? To explore the answers to this question I designed a qualitative case study to gather the lived experience of five purposefully selected students
and the staff at a selected university. Through this research I explored the ecosystem and the experience of the students attending the university. This chapter outlines the research design and methodology followed to answer the research question.

**Researcher Perspective and Positionality**

Reflexivity refers to the researcher’s beliefs, judgements, experiences, and practices that may influence their research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding the background of the researcher is important so that one can reduce or leverage the bias appropriately (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I grew up in a family where we had plenty of nothing but, I believe, enough of everything. The working poor is the best way to characterize our economic disposition. We lived in a lovely home in an economically depressed city neighborhood, a neighborhood in one of those zip codes by which your future is foretold before you are old enough to count. My mother, a widow, was determined to improve the lives of her eight children through prayer, encouragement, and sheer determination. I was the first sibling to attend a four-year institution of higher education. I was a first-generation student who knew very little about higher education, and those experiences remain with me today. At this crossroads in my life, I have the opportunity to shape the trajectory of these students as they navigate their post-secondary journey.

I have served as the Director of the Center for Education and Research, undergraduate lecturer, and mentor at a mid-sized public university in Virginia since 2018. As a director and lecturer, and a mentor, I listen to and give counsel to undergraduate students. Additionally, as a first-generation Black male, I identify with
many of the similar systemic challenges our students are still struggling with, as nearly three generations ago I experienced them myself.

While I empathize with these first-generation, Black students who are determined to succeed, as a first-generation Black, I recognize that my passion for higher education and the plight of Black collegians influenced my understanding of the world. Nevertheless, I recognize how the potential for my axiological perspective might interfere with the research and used solid theories and research practices to manage intervene.

*Theoretical Framework Application*

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Theory served as the framework for this study. The ecological theory provides this research with a theoretical lens by which to examine the external factors impacting learning, development, and achievement among first-generation Black college students. Bronfenbrenner’s seminal work garnered attention as this research offered insight to navigate the diverse, interconnected layers and factors influencing the development and achievement of first-generation, Black students in their post-secondary university environment.

Not only did the ecological theory provide a lens for this research, but Bronfenbrenner (1977) also provided a language to understand and convey responses to the research question. As described in each of the five systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem), Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) language represented the external factors that impact learning, development, and achievement. The hidden curriculum, one of the key aspects of this research, represented many varying factors affecting first-generation, Black students. Through the research question, I sought an understanding of how does the university ecosystem impact first-
generation, Black student success? The literature review, organized through the ecological system lens, helped focus the vast content into meaningful and relevant categories to consider the background of this issue. Finally, I viewed and aligned the themes and findings to the theory.

Understanding the external factors impacting student learning, development, and achievement, materialized as a seminal point in Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) work. Using this examination of external factors informed my research. The use of the case study, with embedded units research design, offered an opportunity to gather and explore rich data from students, the staff managing supporting programs, and observations of the student in their environment.

Social constructivism offered the construct that people realize truth and knowledge through their interactions with the surrounding world (Newman & Latifi, 2021). Newman and Latifi (2021) concluded that Vygotsky, the principal advocate of social constructivism, believed that social learning was a primary tool for learning and development. This concept was consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Theory in that both views conclude that students learn in the environment in which they exist (Newman & Latifi, 2021; Shelton, 2015). My research examined the learning experience by exploring the environment of the student’s upbringing and the campus culture, therefore, I chose Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) theory to frame my work. My research addressed the question how does the university ecosystem impact first-generation Black student success?
Research Design and Rationale

This research allowed me to address a complex issue confronting first-generation Black American students in higher education. The complex issue of achieving positive outcomes for first-generation Black Americans continues to create challenges for all stakeholders. The qualitative approach allowed gathering the students’ stories and lived experiences that shape their current perceptions and dispositions. The use of the qualitative research approach and the application of the ecological theoretical framework allowed me to achieve what Creswell (2018) explained as the essence of this research method, namely, “a representation of the voices of participants, the reflexivity of I, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and its contributions to the literature” (p. 43).

Qualitative research is an inquiry to understand the lived experiences of individuals in specific situations. Creswell (2018) posited that the qualitative study process provides a holistic view of the phenomenon by acquiring a clear understanding through detailed words and views of subjects in the study. Qualitative research looks to the unique human experience to garner truth and understanding of a particular phenomenon. I chose qualitative research because, through the participants’ lived experiences, their voices will be heard. A quantitative method approach could not add a rich real-world contextual understanding of the phenomenon for this research.

For Yin (2018), the case study strategy is a way to research a phenomenon in the context of its multiple real-life variables. The use of the qualitative case study with embedded units will allow me to, as Yin (2018) suggested, “[capture] the perspectives of different participants and [focus] on how their different meanings illuminate the study” (p. 16). I undertook this study to understand the first-generation Black student’s
perception of environmental factors, including the hidden curriculum, impacting their educational pursuits.

Yin (2018) offered that any case study must have a clearly defined case and be bounded appropriately to keep the focus on the phenomenon. I limited this case study by location, the narrow population of first-generation Black students, and their experience at that university. This single case study with embedded units captures and synthesizes the experience of five first generation Black students bound by a single site using the pseudonym of Eagle University.

Additionally, I used case study with embedded units design in this research which allows for a more detailed level of inquiry (Yin, 2018). This design allowed me to gather varying data to develop rich perspectives of experiences from different subjects, thereby reducing instances of researcher generalization. Collecting data from multiple points also allows for triangulation, which ultimately reinforces the validity and credibility of the data (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). I examined one case comprised of students at one university to understand their lived experiences. Additionally, I gathered perspectives from staff at this same university. Observational data and document reviews also contributed to the data to gain a holistic perspective of the experience of these students.

Evaluating each data set as an embedded unit offered context to this complex environment and allow for a more precise understanding of the experiences of the students at this university. The embedded units of the case are students who volunteered to participate in focus groups for my research ($n=5$), staff of the Student Transition Program ($n=5$), and observations of students in campus orientation ($n=5$). Figure 2 depicts the embedded units of this case.
Site Selection and Participant Sampling

One of the aims of my research was to give voice to the students who were experiencing the challenges of higher education and were first-generation Black students. The best place to hear those voices was on a public university campus in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The study refers to the public university by the pseudonym Eagle University. Access to Eagle University enrollment analytics, students, and faculty facilitated my understanding of the complex research issue. This site provides a setting where the research participants share a similar disposition of being Black and first-generation students.

Additionally, Eagle University allowed me to see how the research participants interacted and coped in the PWI ecosystem. A final reason for selecting Eagle University was because one-third of the first-year class are first-generation students (State Council, 2021). Site selection of a public university where the number of first-generation students makes up a significant percentage of the total student body provided a wealth of observation opportunities. In this section, I describe the site and participant selection process in detail.
Site

The selected site is Eagle University campus, which is a pseudonym for a university in the Commonwealth of Virginia. I selected this site due to its size, demographics, first-generation initiatives, and the availability of students to supply rich lived experiences (Ace, 2018, 2019, 2020; NCES 2019; 2020). Additionally, I serve as the Director for one of the university campuses, which hosts and supports graduate and continuing education students. My position affords me access to the information necessary and the university extended approval for this research, on the condition of anonymity.

The site is a mid-sized public liberal arts university with over 4,400 undergraduate students and approximately 300 graduate students. In the Fall 2019 academic year, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (2021) reported the undergraduate headcount at 4,182, and of that number, 300 undergraduates self-designated as Black, Non-Hispanic at Eagle University. In the Fall of the 2020 academic year, the university touted an undergraduate headcount of 3,993, with 315 undergraduates self-designated as Black, Non-Hispanic (State Council, 2021). Under the leadership of the university’s 10th president, the university has aggressively recruited and enrolled students belonging to the underrepresented population groups. Twenty percent of these students are first-generation, Black students. The university set up the Student Transition Program (STP) to support these students.

The student transition program began in 2017 with funding for three full-time positions. The purpose of this team is specifically to assist first generation students integrate into the campus culture. Identified as a college pathway program, the staff are charged with offering concierge services to high school juniors and seniors, bridging the
chasm between the two levels of education. Once the students arrive on campus, the staff act as mentors and coaches on campus life integration. As established, the STP team was designed to support these first-generation students during their first year of college experience. The annual first-generation student population is 193.

Participants

Creswell (2018) posited that the use of focus groups is beneficial when the potential for gathering meaningful, rich data when the group has significant similarities with each member. Additionally, when the time to collect data has limited, the use of the focus group provided opportunities to capture lived experiences (Creswell, 2018). Using the focus group gave voice to my research participants living the realities of this complex problem.

Students for focus group. The participants for this case study were first-generation, Black students attending Eagle University. Following Creswell’s (2018) typology of sampling strategies, I used purposeful sampling to select five participants. The purposeful sampling technique provides the most significant opportunity to gather informed data about the research subject (Creswell, 2018). The rationale for this sampling approach stems from the limited time to collect data and the availability of both students and staff. Additionally, based on the recommendations of Eagle University’s Provost, Director of Admissions, and Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and the limited time Eagle University granted access to students for data collection, the purposeful sampling technique proved the most efficient and effective way to capture the rich descriptive lived experiences of the research subjects. This use of purposeful sampling helped me to fulfill that intent and find five volunteers that meet the four
criteria: (a) be 18 years old or older, (b) be of the Black race, (c) self-identify as a first-generation, and (d) be a current or past Eagle University campus student.

I coordinated with Eagle University’s STP leadership team to create and distribute a flyer via campus email, seeking volunteer participants for this research. As specified in the recruitment flyer, eligible volunteers had to meet four criteria: (a) be 18 years old or older, (b) be of the Black race, (c) self-identify as a first-generation, and (d) be a current Eagle University student. Volunteers contacted me directly and received an informed consent form. The recruitment flyer is found at Appendix A and the Informed Consent is found at Appendix B.

Observation events. According to Creswell (2018), researcher observation is a qualitative research tool that allows me to observe the human attitudes and behaviors of the researched subjects in their field setting. Following Creswell’s advice, I observed an elective course for the general student body but a mandatory class for all Eagle University STP students. Orientation sessions are based on demand and are only offered when new students arrive on campus. Only one orientation session occurred during the data collection period. While this limited the observation opportunities, the one session was robust due to the number of attendees. There were twelve new students attending this session. One member of the STP staff facilitated the event. An adjunct instructor taught the three-semester hour course.

University STP staff. Two university staff members run the university’s STP program. While this office is comprised of three full-time positions, one position was vacant. During my data collection period, two staff members were available to interview
for this research. Their depth of knowledge regarding the campus culture and the past interactions with students offered extensive insight into the research topic. The STP staff have a unique role and access to the student experience that could not be harvested from any other participant group.

Data Collection Procedures

To increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the research, it is necessary to collect enough data to reach an understanding of the issue studied and consider a variety of viewpoints (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Creswell (2018) posited that the collection of multiple forms of data is necessary to maintain both research validity and reliability. To that end, I employed four data collection methods. The data collection procedures used in this research include focus groups, interviews, observation, and document reviews. Each of these procedures fits the qualitative research design and is necessary to answer the research question. Each of these methods and data sources offered an opportunity to explore the research question from a different perspective. The multiple sources of data also allow for triangulation to enhance validity of my findings. The specific process used in each data collection method is outlined in the next section.

I collected data from four interrelated activities on the Eagle University campus in four steps. First, I collected historical data from Eagle University’s Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness Department. Second, I collected data from a semi-structured interview of two members of the Student Transition Program (STP) staff. Third, I conducted one 60-minute semi-structured focus group which included five, first-generation, Black students attending Eagle University. Lastly, I conducted observation of an Eagle University student STP orientation class. All data collection occurred between April 2022 and May
2022 (see Table 2). This process follows Creswell’s (2018) guidance for qualitative research in that “we visualize data collection as a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 148). The next section outlines the procedures used for each data collection.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection and Analysis Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed Consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STP Staff Interviews

Creswell (2018) explained that the semi-structured interview allows for free and open discussion that facilitates understanding the research participants’ lived experiences. The semi-structured interview guide used in this research included six questions derived from the analysis of the literature as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). These questions centered on the ideas of campus culture, student sense of belonging, and student support structures. I designed the guide to elicit focused and meaningful stories from the experiences of the STP staff. The embedded nature of their role assisting first-generation students for more than four years allowed them to offer a deep understanding of campus culture. The experience in their roles as STP staff offered additional insight and richness to the research. Their proximity to the students and the campus culture
offers a perspective that enhances the understanding of the topic to answer the research question posed.

Before interviews commenced, each participant signed informed consent (see Appendix B). I scheduled interviews one week in advance and booked a conference room on campus near the employee’s worksite to allow for ease of access, privacy, and to limit disruptions. I scheduled the sessions for one hour to allow for free-flowing conversation. I outlined the topics of interest in a semi-structured interview guide to generate conversation to contribute to understanding the campus environment (see Appendix C). I designed the interviews with the STP staff as an intentional conversation to reach toward understanding their ten years of experience with the first-generation Black students and their challenges navigating the university environment.

At the beginning of each interview, I greeted the participant and thanked them for their time. I reminded them of the purpose of the study, their previously signed informed consent, and their ability to stop participating at any time. I initiated small talk to begin the interview process to increase the participant’s comfort (Tracy, 2019). I listened attentively for cues to inform my research. I used mirroring techniques, repeating spoken statements back to the participant, to ensure I understood their context. I asked follow-up and redirection questions to gain a deeper understanding of their statements and perspectives on the campus ecological system. I audio recorded each of the 45–60-minute interviews. I transcribed the recordings utilizing a Microsoft translation software application. An initial review of my notes, memos, and transcriptions occurred within 24 hours of the interviews.
During the interviews I took notes to document key phrases and comments offered. I allowed thirty minutes in between each interview to memo my thoughts, recollections, and consider ideas generated in the interviews. Memoing enhances the research experience and is a flexible tool to assist the research in forming connections between the responses and the topic of research (Birks et al., 2008). This process of reflecting and memoing immediately following the interview added additional context and elevated my understanding of the unique stories shared in the interviews.

I then provided the interviewees with an electronic copy of the transcript and asked them to review it for accuracy. Each interviewee had one week to review and submit any necessary corrections or additions. Gaining participant feedback on interview transcriptions and interpretations increases credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I then secured this data in a password protected file on my personal computer.

**Student Focus Group**

As indicated by Creswell (2018), focus groups are essential in qualitative research cases where investigators seek to derive data significant to understanding the lived experience. Focus groups offer a setting where participants prompt ideas from one another, describe shared experiences, and reinforce statements through the discussion (Creswell, 2018). The collaborative conversation afforded by focus groups can generate richer information, adding more context than one on one interviews. For my research, this collection method was essential to understand the experience of the first-generation, Black students. To find student participants, a call for volunteers was distributed on campus.
Eagle University’s STP leadership team distributed a flyer via campus email, seeking volunteers for this research. As specified in the recruitment flyer, eligible volunteers had to meet four criteria: (a) be 18 years old or older, (b) be of the Black race, (c) self-identify as a first-generation, and (d) be a current Eagle University student. Volunteers contacted me directly and received an informed consent form (see Appendix B). The consent form presented the background information on the research, the procedures for the research, the study’s voluntary nature, and finally, the risk and benefits of being in the study.

Creswell (2018) recommended a small population for a focus group to create a more intimate and less formal environment allowing for free and open discussion, particularly when addressing sensitive issues. I determined five participants as the appropriate sample size for this research. Once I received the signed, informed consent forms from the five qualified participants, I scheduled the focus group.

I scheduled the focus group session on the Eagle University campus in a location that was secure and convenient for participants. I scheduled the session for one hour to ensure enough time to garner a clear understanding of the five participants who have experienced this complex issue at Eagle University (EU). I personally facilitated the focus group using a discussion guide. I developed a guide with six questions to prompt conversation in the focus group. I designed these questions to elicit responses to explore the campus environment and the student’s lived experience. The guiding questions used in the focus group are found in Appendix D. At the beginning of the focus group, I greeted the participants and thanked them for their time. I reminded them of the voluntary nature of the research and their ability to end participation at any time. I initiated small
talk to begin the discussion process and increase the participant’s comfort. The comfort of the participants is key to encouraging open discussion to learn of their lived experiences (Tracy, 2019). Asking the prepared open-ended questions allowed students to engage in a dialogue to share their stories and experiences regarding the campus environment. I asked follow-up questions to gain deeper understanding of their statements. Although it was a slow start, the conversation began to flow freely as the students opened up and shared their stories with one another. As we approached our time limit there was also a decline in participant engagement, indicating the group had reached a natural end to the conversation.

I recorded the focus group discussions on a digital recorder, and I took handwritten notes during the session. I then transcribed the audio recordings utilizing a Microsoft translation software application. I reviewed my notes and memos, and I transcribed the data within 24 hours of the focus group. The focus group participants received an electronic copy of the transcript and were asked to review the document for accuracy. A two-week review process allowed the student participants ample time to review and amend their research input. This time allocation considered the student’s pending examinations and work schedules. Upon receipt of their feedback, I then secured this data in a password-protected file on my personal computer.

*Student Observations*

Creswell (2018) explained qualitative research can benefit from observational data collection when the behaviors of the participants add to the context of the research question. As this research seeks to understand the student’s perception of the campus environment, seeing them engaging in this activity in a natural setting benefits this
research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this observational activity, I was a non-participant, simply positioning myself at the back of the room to observe the behaviors and listen to the interaction of students and STP staff during the orientation session. Using the behavioral observation protocol (see Appendix E) inspired by the work of Lane and Harris (2015), I recorded handwritten field notes to document observations. This observation occurred in a formal classroom setting on campus. The formal orientation class was a 50-minute session with twelve students and two staff in attendance. An initial review of my notes and memos occurred within 24 hours of the observations.

Document Reviews

Document reviews in qualitative research are beneficial because they add to the available data for triangulation, which ultimately leads to the credibility and transparency of the research (Creswell et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Data collected from the university’s Instructional Analysis & Effectiveness department provided historical records of first-generation enrollment and graduation rates. The collected data included four student cohorts Fall 2014, Fall 2015, Fall 2016, and Fall 2017. Additionally, I reviewed data on the overall number of applications, acceptances, and enrollments of first-time, degree-seeking students for Fall semesters from 2014–2017. The confluence of this data is essential to the research question because it validates the inconsistencies in graduation rates of four cohorts of students, which reinforces the primary purpose of this research. Table 3 displays the relevant data for this research.
Table 3

Graduation Rates by Cohort Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>First generation (FG)</th>
<th>Non-first generation (NFG)</th>
<th>Fall 2014 Cohort</th>
<th>Fall 2015 Cohort</th>
<th>Fall 2016 Cohort</th>
<th>Fall 2017 Cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black/African</td>
<td>NFG</td>
<td></td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American White</td>
<td>FG</td>
<td></td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NFG</td>
<td></td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>59.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FG</td>
<td></td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>NFG</td>
<td></td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>56.6%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FG</td>
<td></td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis Procedures

Yin’s (2016) guidelines for qualitative data analysis recommend following a cycle comprised of five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. Creswell and Poth (2018) described an analysis spiral which adds credibility and reliability to qualitative research. I integrated both approaches to analyze the data collected in this research. Additionally, I leveraged a commercially available qualitative software program, Nvivo, to assist in coding, developing themes, and to improve the validity of my research. In the following sections I explain the analysis process I followed to interpret the data for this research.

Manual Analysis

The first step of my qualitative analysis consisted of Yin’s (2016) compiling phase. In this phase, I reviewed and summarized my STP staff interview notes, Student focus group notes, and orientation observation notes. I reconciled my notes, added to my memos, and made corrections to my written comments through a review of the audio recordings of the interview and focus group sessions. An initial preliminary review of the
collected documents occurred during this phase. I normalized, analyzed, and synthesized the data individually by each embedded group first. Manually considering what major themes and ideas are emerging as you read the content begins the process of thematic analysis is a critical first step to analyzing qualitative data (Creswell et al., 2016).

Because I used a Microsoft voice-to-text application to transcribe the interviews and focus groups, I was able to listen to them again and check my notes and the transcriptions for clarity, accuracy, and redundancies. I ensured the correct spelling of words and the accuracy of the grammatical content. Listening and reviewing the transcripts simultaneously allowed me to further immerse myself in the content of the research. Listening again to the non-verbal cues such as laughter, crosstalk, interruptions, repetition, and inflection added contextual value to the transcriptions (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

After normalizing and correcting all the data, I consolidated the data from each collection method as a single document. For example, all interview transcripts were consolidated into one document. Once consolidated, I read the content again. Even at this early stage, I began to see common phrases and consider themes as I reviewed the content through this holistic perspective. This sorting and filtering process allowed me to visualize the emerging themes, further facilitating my ability to chart and tabulate the collected data.

The second step of my analysis was the disassembling phase (Yin, 2016). Disassembling the information allows the research to look at the data with new perspectives, searching for common phrases. I accomplished this step first by keeping each embedded unit intact but dissecting it from the question posed. I noted how many
times comments such as those related to a hidden curriculum were made. I then reread their respective inputs and summarized them to allow me the opportunity to annotate and assign initial themes.

Based on the literature, the theoretical framework, and the research question, the third step, reassembling, allowed me to find new connections by following the emerging patterns and themes (Yin, 2016). As I reread the transcripts of the interviews and the focus group, I governed my thought process by asking how the themes address the research question: How does the university ecosystem impact first-generation Black student success? For example, utterances of words and phrases like friendships, acceptance, trust, relationships, welcoming, and support fit the emerging theme of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). The STP staff interview produced repeated terms such as self-awareness, relationships, transition, counselors, confidant, and parent figure. I continued to review these developing themes, reorganizing them, looking for new connections and perspectives, using the spiraling technique advised by Creswell and Poth (2018). I consulted the major themes identified in my literature review and reflected on the theoretical frameworks foundational to this research. Through five iterations of spiral reviews, I challenged my coding, themes, connections, and interpretations repeatedly. Finally, data saturation occurred when no new themes emerged (Yin, 2018).

I applied this approach to the interview and focus group data individually to identify the themes from each embedded unit. After I coded each participant group, I reassembled the pooled content from the embedded units and repeated the process to evaluate the case. Table 4 shows the alignment of themes, key notes from the literature review, and quotes from the interviews and focus group.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Literature Review</th>
<th>Focus Group Quotes</th>
<th>Interview Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>Experiences and perceptions the student encounters at the institution of higher education strongly influences or challenges the student’s sense of belonging (Dias, 2022).</td>
<td>“… oh my God I’m being bombarded by all the white faces so many White folks”</td>
<td>“Another challenge is their sense of belonging, not having a connection to people that look like them...we know that everyone has a unique life experience that brings in certain things that they might see and interpret and perceive differently than others...this is hard for these students...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Support</td>
<td>To better support Black students in higher education, colleges need to understand the barriers they encounter to provide better support for this minoritized student population (Mondisa &amp; Main, 2021).</td>
<td>“I don’t really have that support with my professors or anything cause we can’t really resonate on certain levels because they don’t really understand me or my experiences as an Black”</td>
<td>“They need support, some a great deal, so I ensure they know my door is always open to them. Their desire to come, whether it be for advising it, whether it be, just to use the space as an outlet or a safe place to have someone to listen or sometimes just a place to feel at home in between courses...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Culture</td>
<td>University campuses with a diversified student and faculty culture convey a welcoming environment for the marginalized underrepresented students on the college campus (Stephens et al., 2015).</td>
<td>“A lot of times you like don’t get a professor that looks like you and that kind of like maybe hinders your experiences in the class or like wanted to say something like correct somebody when they say something that might be improper because you are the only Black male in the class, so you already know what they thinking”</td>
<td>“They recognize the challenges and experiences outside the classroom and sometimes need help negotiating/navigating this new culture. Understanding how to work with their sense of identity while integrating with their peers and faculty is a challenge”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yin’s (2016) fourth phase pointed to the interpretation of the data. In this phase, the researcher must find meaning in the new clusters by finding patterns. This phase allowed me to tell the participants’ stories based on a holistic view of the reassembled data. I completed the interpretation and developed level 1 and 2 codes using Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) five ecological systems.

**Software Analysis**

Before moving on to the fifth step of Yin’s (2018) analysis process, interpret, I employed Nvivo, a commercially available web-based qualitative software tool, to provide additional clarity on the coding and themes developed in the manual process. Creswell (2018) identified Nvivo as a software package that provided a secure means to conduct data analysis. The extensive versatility of the software gave ease in handling the collected data. I imported my data from each of the embedded units into Nvivo. I then imported the coding schema developed in my manual review as described in the compiling phase. I reviewed the phrases, assigned codes, and iterated this process using the spiral technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of NVivo aided in validating my codes, facilitated the subsequent phases of the analysis, and helped codify the accuracy of my initial manual assignment. Upon completion, I exported the data into tables, word clouds, and charts, positioning me to return to the final step Yin’s (2016) analysis process, concluding and reporting the findings. This concluded the qualitative analysis required of the interview and focus group data.

After an initial manual review of the focus group data, I uploaded the transcript into Nvivo. Figure 3 depicts the initial Nvivo code generation from the focus group transcript. Figure 4 depicts the initial Nvivo coding from the interview data. The five
focus group participants are represented in the center of the graph. Some of the generated codes include lacking support, STP, Professors, maintaining relationships and connections, work-study, and feeling unique on campus.

Figure 3. Visual representation of focus group data coding in Nvivo.
The interview resulted in 15 sub-themes which also aligned to the major themes of belonging, support groups, and campus culture (see Figure 5). The most common sub-theme uttered by both participants was student’s perception of self-doubt with 33 instances. Throughout my literature review, scholars, Mondisa (2021), Strayhorn (2012; 2018), and Tinto (2017), have stated unequivocally that academic success and a sense of belonging are inextricably linked. When first-generation, African American students
question their self-efficacy, their potential for success in higher education becomes questionable.

*Figure 5. STP interview responses to sub-themes by participant.*

Following the same process, the manual and software analysis allowed me to uncover and identify thematic categories based on the focus group participant responses. The focus group resulted in 16 key phrases organized by the three major themes of belonging, support groups, and campus culture. Similarly, the interviews resulted in 15 key phrases aligned to those phrases (see Table 5). By viewing the responses organized by theme and frequency allowed me to recognize the factors that were most noted by the participants, indicating the most significant concerns for student success.
### Participant Response Analysis by Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Interview Instances</th>
<th>Focus Group Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Doubt</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceptions</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High School Preparations</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge Gap</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imposter Syndrome</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Groups</td>
<td>Support from others</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Culture</td>
<td>Campus Activities</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom Environment</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Records Review Analysis

The data provided by the university’s Instructional Analysis & Effectiveness Division did not require the rigor of Yin’s (2016) five step process of analysis. This data offered a breakdown of demographic information. Specifically, Eagle University provided data on four cohorts delineated along racial lines and first-generation and non-first-generation students. This data presented a macro view of Eagle University’s student body (see Table 3). Analyzing the data analytics reinforces the need for this study. Examining four Eagle University cohorts (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017) shows a significant disparity between the graduation rates of first-generation and non-first-generation students. The data reflects the university’s success at retaining first-generation students, particularly Black students. Across the four cohorts, Black collegian retention rates were
86.4%, 90.9%, 76.3%, and 89.3%, respectively. Unfortunately, the graduation rates for the same cohorts paint a different picture. The graduation rates for the 2014–2017 cohorts are 40.9%, 59.1%, 28.6%, and 42.9%, respectively. What Eagle University data analytics show is a disparity in the graduation rates of first-generation students, particularly among Black collegians.

*Trustworthiness and Authenticity*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the researcher maintains trustworthiness in qualitative research by maintaining credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the research effort. Establishing and maintaining trustworthiness in this study is critical for the study objective to come to fruition. Congruency is the first measure of credibility pursued through this research. Specifically, ensuring the data received in each research step is consistent with reality and divorced from researcher bias is important. Member-checking allowed this research to maintain credibility and mitigated bias. Additionally, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, I kept an audit trail and a reflexive journal to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research. I conducted multiple data collection methods, conducted diligent reviews of interview notes, transcripts, and taped recordings to meet the high bar of qualitative trustworthiness. These multiple data sets allowed for triangulation. The use of Nvivo qualitative software, interview and focus group protocols, the rigor of Yin’s (2016) analysis framework and Creswell and Poth’s (2018) spiral analysis process added credibility, reliability, and validity. The use of document reviews provided additional validation of the success rates of the student graduation. Observations added to the understanding of the lived experience of the students.
To address the trustworthiness of this research, I used direct quotes from the participants of the focus groups and interviews, explaining their experiences at the university. These direct quotes represent the truth of the students and staff participating in this research. Aligning these direct quotes with the themes and mapping them to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory further enhances the trustworthiness of this study.

Ethical Considerations

I conducted this study with transparency and the highest ethical standards. Further, two universities granted approval for conducting this research. The first step was receiving approval for this research through the Baylor University IRB. I submitted this research to the Baylor University Office of Research Compliance for review and received an exempt determination (see Appendix F). Eagle University approval required me to follow the research protocols outlined in the Eagle University’s Manual of Policies and Procedures for the IRB. Participants were informed thoroughly of this study’s aims, and they signed written consent forms. I explained the process of anonymizing their information and storing the resulting data to secure and protect all facets of the research. Additionally, I informed each participant that this research was voluntary, and they had every right to stop participating at any time. Upon completion of the data collection, I afforded the participants a final review of the transcription and interpretation of the data.

For this study, I employed the protection of research participants, knowledge of ethical research procedures, governing federal regulations, and understanding of the tenants of informed consent among the subjects reviewed to ensure the highest regard for
ethical research are all elements of ethical research. A categorical imperative for this pragmatic research was the principle of causing no harm during this research.

I utilized Creswell’s (2018) principles to ensure the safeguarding of the collected data and the volunteer research participants. All data and devices used to manage the qualitative data will be kept for a period of three years. I safeguarded the collected data and secured it in a storage cabinet with access limited to only me. Pseudonyms for each volunteer participant ensured anonymity for the research subjects (Creswell, 2018). The use of a data collection matrix provided the organization of the qualitative data.

Limitations and Delimitations

The first limitation of this qualitative research involved the role and influence I bring to the study. My influence and lens are what Creswell (2018) described as reflexivity. As a qualitative researcher immersed in lived experiences, it is important to be aware of the potential influence I have on the research. Yin (2016) posited that reflexivity is a real threat when observing human beings and their activities. Yin prescribed using a personal journal to outline what I identified as memoing and notetaking. An additional limitation was meeting Eagle University guidance as it referred to the amount of time and the availability of student participants in this research. Synching Eagle University’s timeline with that of the specified data collection timeline available created a constraint that was an additional limitation to this research.

Generalizability of qualitative research is traditionally not accepted due to the subjective nature of the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Myers, 2000). The situations and experiences of this sample population are unique to them and are unlikely to be replicated in other settings and times. Instead, the value of the research is found in the
understanding of the real-world experience for these participants in this social and historical setting (Myers, 2000).

Creswell (2018) identified delimitations as intentional restrictions applied to research that prevents or limits the transferability of the findings. The delimitations of my qualitative research include the research site location and selection, and the research participants themselves. My research question intentionally limited the student responses. I limited the data collection timeframe to two months during 2022. The mid-sized public university in Virginia is another limitation established for this research. Finally, I limited the research participants to a specific set of the university’s total population group, which presents another limitation chosen purposes of this research. In fact, Creswell and Poth (2018) caution researchers that results of case study research should not be generalized.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided insight into the methodology and theoretical framework for this qualitative, single case study with embedded units. I presented a discussion of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory as the lens to explore the elements of the hidden curriculum that first-generation, Black students perceive to impact their ability to obtain a bachelor’s degree. This research is a way to explore those rich lived experiences allowing a voice to the participants. This chapter also included a discussion of the research design and rationale, site selection, participant sample, data collection procedures, and data analysis steps. In Chapter Three, I present the results and implications of this case study research.
CHAPTER THREE

Results and Implications

Introduction

This qualitative study sought to understand how the university ecosystem impacts first generation, Black student success. This study contributed to existing literature by giving voice to the students who lived through this experience. I designed the study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students and staff at the Eagle University, specifically exploring the experience of the students to answer the research question: How does the university ecosystem impact first-generation, Black student success?

This chapter begins by presenting the data gathered from the student focus group. Next presented is the data collected from the semi-structured Student Transition Program (STP) staff interviews. Third, the observation of an STP orientation session conducted at the predominantly White institution (PWI) research site. Fourth, I present the cross-analysis, and themes from the triangulated data. Lastly, this chapter provides findings and implications in light of my study’s identified limitations and delimitations.

Case Description and Thematic Analysis

This qualitative case study with embedded units sought to understand how the university ecosystem impacts first-generation, Black student success. I bound the case with one PWI, the shared experiences of five students attending that PWI, and the two STP supporting staff at that university. Additionally, observations and document reviews provided additional insight. Each research population served as an embedded unit of the
case. Individually, I analyzed each embedded unit before conducting the analysis of the holistic, primary unit of analysis (Creswell et al., 2018). Using a qualitative case study approach enabled me to describe the complex experiences and challenges first-generation Black students face when pursuing their education.

The five focus group participants comprised two seniors, two juniors, and one sophomore. Three of the participants were female and two were male. All the participants were on work-study programs to help pay for their college education. A surprising fact that emerged was all focus group student participants were on a work-study program. This was significant because when looking at the limited free time these students have between classes, labs, homework, and work schedules, one can recognize the limited time to socialize and build relationships within the university ecosystem. The group’s collective grade point average ranged from 2.9 to 3.7 on a 4.0 grading scale. Three participants were pursuing degrees in business, one a degree in history, with the final participant working towards a degree in computer science. Table 6 highlights the demographics of the focus group participants.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Urban/Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus group provided data that facilitated an understanding of how the university ecosystem impacts first-generation Black student success. The responses
further reinforce the efficacy of utilizing Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Theory as the framework in the data collection and analysis phases of this research (Creswell et al., 2018). The responses from the focus group participants provided insight that aligned to the descriptions of frameworks chosen for the study.

Utilizing Yin’s (2016) process for pattern matching and Nvivo qualitative software, I examined the data collected from the focus group, staff interview, document review, and the observance of the student orientation. An analysis of these data sets as embedded units not only contributed to the validity and aided triangulation but also elevated my understanding of the interrelatedness of the research participants. I used the data from the staff interviews to inform the development of the focus group protocol.

I established themes from the utterances that described and addressed the perceptions and experiences of the first-generation Black college students participating in my study. The students’ overall experiences could be characterized into three segments: belonging, campus culture, and support groups. Table 7 contains the complete breakdown of the study themes in response to the main research question.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data point</th>
<th>Theme 1. Belonging</th>
<th>Theme 2. Support Groups</th>
<th>Theme 3. Campus Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Students and STP staff perceive a sense of belonging is a key element that impacts the success of Black students</td>
<td>Students and STP staff perceived support groups as a crucial element impacting first-generation Black student success</td>
<td>Students and STP staff believe campus culture plays a key role in the academic and social integration of Black students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of occurrences</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this section I discuss the findings based on the one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted with the two available STP staff members. Both participants responded to all questions asked. The participant responses were consistent with each other with no noticeable contradictions. Participants for the one-on-one interviews included the staff members (n=2) of the Student Transition Program (STP), anonymized as Luke and Naomi. Both members of the STP staff reported at least five years of experience in the position, offering substantial insight into the research question (See Table 8). Their perspective and first-hand experience offers insight into the complexity of the campus ecosystem and the student’s engagement with and responses to those factors.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview STP Staff Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After reviewing the institutional and STP documents, I started collecting data through interviews (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). From this interview, I gained greater clarity and understanding of the mission of the STP program. I benefited from the depth of historical knowledge based on his observations of this program after serving with it for over nine years (Stake, 1995). Before arriving at Eagle University, Luke served as a high school guidance counselor and teacher for over five years.
As I commenced the interview process with Luke, I immediately sensed the passion and conviction he brought to his task and mission of supporting the students in his charge. I asked Luke to tell me how he builds rapport with the students. Luke responded that:

For me, for the students that I get close with, I think it is more like a kinship like they don’t like some of them joke with me, call me Uncle, which I guess I’m at that and some of them say you talked to me, you. Talked to me like an uncle, like not. Like an advisor. Well, as a part of that, mentorship is just being honest with them. We joke all the time we really hold no punches when it comes to how we talked with the students, I think I might be the softer because there are circumstances that a lot of times first generation students of color experience that their counterparts don’t experience. I feel like we talked to them like family, you know, like the same way your mom or someone may talk to you and say something.

I asked Luke to explain his thoughts on the university’s support mechanism to first-generation, Black students. Luke explained that first, students needed to understand the expectations of Eagle University. They needed to understand that expectations/requirements vary from professor to professor, depending on the class. Luke stated:

And I think that’s more so in some departments, more so than others, but I think we have a lot of bright students that come through here, and some of them need extra push here and there in certain ways to be successful at certain types of courses, but I think they can be as successful, but I think it’s usually this wall of these are my expectations for you. I want to grade everyone treat everyone the same, and that’s fair I’m invested in you, so if something is not going right, I take your failure as my failure and I need to talk to you to figure out what’s going on as opposed to I taught you the lesson I gave you the same test as everyone else.

Luke’s observations regarding first-generation, Black integration into the campus culture proved a continuing challenge for students, especially those from marginalized populations. Luke described a past conversation with a first-generation, Black student
that seems to be a recurring theme for this group of students. Once again, Luke provided insight by stating:

Black males complain to him that if they don’t do this, speak this way, or carry myself a certain way I am worried about how I might be perceived and judged by other students but especially judged by my professors. They tell me they get tired of having to fight that imposter syndrome.

Naomi also brought to the conversation a richness and candor of her observations during her tenure with STP. Naomi served as the Assistant STP Director and has been in that capacity for over five years. She served as the regional interface with the students while they were still seniors in high school. In this role, Naomi also serves as most of the STP student’s first counselor and mentor for the incoming freshman have been acquainted. When sharing her observations about the campus culture she explained that stress and anxiety first-generation students encountered, both perceived and real, had a real impact on the students’ psychological footing. She explained:

I do feel like students of color feel like it’s their job in class to represent sometimes the whole every non-White experience and that’s not their fault. That’s something the professor is putting on them or for whatever reason they feel compelled to do. And I think that must be a very heavy burden, and that there needs to be a way to work through that from the top end, so that that’s not the feeling in the classroom. So, you fix it even though it isn’t a problem.

This perception clearly affirms what Bowman and Denson’s (2022) study reported as a leading cause in the growing success gap between first-generation, Black and their White peers. This internalized perception of first-generation, Black is that they must represent the entire race instead of their own opinions/dispositions.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (1979) posited that these types of exterior influences, positive or negative, have a corollary with psychological development.
Naomi also shared her observations as they pertained to the family and family support. Naomi proudly claims the title of mom to her students while at the university. She pointed out that she had received many calls daily and night about nonacademic matters. One shared observation involved her appreciation and understanding of some Latino traditions. Specifically, she shared:

My Latino families present a cultural challenge for their young daughters who go far away from home for an education. These first-generation students come from households that have a family structure where it is almost impossible for their daughters to get away from. The family wants them home where they can be protected and safe. When these students come to Eagle University, I have to ensure that not only is the student looked after but must ensure the parents are comfortable as well.

Strayhorn (2019) stated that humans, especially Latinos, will go to great lengths to establish or find “mi gente,” meaning one’s people or village. In higher education, finding and identifying with one’s “mi gente” is vital to establishing that sense of belonging. Bronfenbrenner (1979) also posited that the family has the most significant influence on development. This influence is what comprises the ecological theory’s microsystem.

Naomi’s observations regarding the support efforts of the STP proved informative as well. While several items were discussed, the one item Naomi ensured I heard and understood related to the need for all first-generation students to trust the STP staff and ensure the support they rendered was genuine. They needed to know the STP team supported them in both good and bad times. She then shared an example of how despite their close relationship, she would discipline the students, ensuring they understood the consequences of their actions. She noted:

They’ve been able to get to know me. They trust me. So last spring I had two that got caught smoking weed and they called me at 2:00 AM to let me know they had
been caught smoking weed and what was going to happen ‘cause they needed to graduate knowing I think that like my own child I was going to be upset with them but I wasn’t. I’m still always on their side 100% of the time. I’m always on your side, no matter how dumb thing you were currently doing is and I would say extremely frank.

Naomi’s actions represent the support that positively influences the outcomes of all first-generation, Blacks and other marginalized students. Sneyers and De Witte’s (2018) meta-analysis concluded that higher education institutions with proactive student support systems had more success with retention integration. These supporting actions highlighted solutions for preventing the alienation of first-generation, Black collegians (Strayhorn, 2020). Bronfenbrenner (1979) theory alluded to this notion of support as he defined and described the mesosystem of his ecological theory. Successful navigation through complex social environments of human development requires the interconnectedness of supporting networks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Surprisingly, the current observations and experiences discovered in this interview closely aligned with the published research. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (1979) asserted human development, positive or negative, is influenced by the environment surrounding the developing individual. These interviewees seemed to intuitively understand the impact of the university ecosystem on the students. David et al. (2019), Dias (2022), Bergen et al. (2020), and Strayhorn (2019) all stated that successful outcomes in higher education for marginalized students are a fundamental factor to consider. Tinto (2017) also conducted a study highlighting the challenges of first-generation matriculation and the environmental factors. Nevertheless, observations made in these STP staff interviews suggested a tremendous amount of work remains to address the quality of the environmental elements of higher education. Of note are the
consistencies between the student focus group responses and the STP staff responses regarding the perceived impact of environmental conditions on student success rates.

**Focus Group Findings**

In this section, I summarize the findings from the data collected from the five participants in the focus group. I conducted the focus group on the Eagle University campus and intentionally limited the sample size to help build rapport to allow for a free-flowing conversation (Creswell, 2018). I facilitated the focus group with a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C) comprised of six questions related to the university’s ecosystem, first-generation, Black challenges at a PWI, and their vision of success at Eagle University. Collectively, the participants voiced concern over having that sense of belonging, campus culture, and support groups.

Question 1 asked each participant to tell me a little about their dreams and aspirations at Eagle University and in life. This question enabled me to understand better the richness of each participant’s personal story. This question also offered a chance to calm the participants, encouraging them to open up and speak freely about their university experience. Each participant felt a sense of shared struggle from personal stories of endurance, perseverance, and courage. I posed question 2 to understand the student’s journey and the “why” for seeking a postsecondary education. Specifically, each student was asked about their decision to attend college. This question enabled me to understand better the depth of commitment each participant brought to Eagle University. Question 3 asked each participant to share their individual family story. This question highlighted the challenges of navigating higher education because none of the participants had family knowledge of higher education. This question also provided
insight into each participant’s degree of support before arriving at Eagle University.

Question 4 asked each participant to share their experiences thus far at Eagle University. This question was designed to extract each participant’s current lived experiences. The responses ranged from needing support to navigate the college experience (academically and culturally) to feeling isolated and misunderstood by White peers and professors.

Surprisingly, the student responses aligned with both Strayhorn’s (2012, 2018, 2019) and Broom’s (2019) findings regarding first-generation, Black development of a sense of belonging in higher education.

Based on Question 4 responses, Question 5 asked each participant to identify what they perceived as challenges for first-generation Black students attending Eagle University. Five of the six participant responses included comments on feeling disconnected and adrift from viable support networks and not understanding how to build relations with professors whom many respondents felt did not understand. The individual burden of representing an entire race in the classroom over a social issue was cumbersome for several participants. The participants raised the issue of the limited number of Black faculty and questioned the reason for the low minority population. The underrepresentation of Black faculty and the burdensome cultural issues these participants faced in their academic journey are critical to understanding their success in higher education (Bergen et al., 2020).

Question 6 was designed to elicit observations and experiences of Eagle University campus culture. Each participant was asked to tell of their experiences with campus life. A collective comment surrounded the notion of having to be race representatives for any/all issues currently hot in the media. A genuine concern regarding
misperceptions surrounding narratives, primarily negative, about Blacks, specifically Black males. These responses illuminate a key element of the purpose for my research and partially answer the research question.

I conducted thematic analysis to make sense of the over 1200 coded data elements from the focus group transcription. After the coding and analysis process, the content of the data collected in the focus group resulted in 16 sub-themes and three major themes of belonging, support groups, and campus culture. The results of the thematic analysis are outlined in the next sections.

**Belonging.** The major theme of belonging was the most significant theme with 252 utterances referring to this topic. It is also the major theme with the most sub-themes of eight. These sub-themes are understanding, perceptions, self-doubt, tuition, knowledge gaps, imposter syndrome, empathy, and high school preparation.

Similarly, despite this lack of a sense of belongingness of the minority students, they adjusted and continue to adapt to their environment. The minority students have since become aware of the value of connecting and communicating with their professors and peers. Through their time at the university, they witnessed the roles that connection and networking could create in their personal and academic lives. As observed by the faculty members and instructors, the minorities found the importance of learning from the knowledge and experiences of the other individuals and groups around them.

**Support groups.** All five students mentioned the crucial need for access to a support system for guidance and motivation. The focus group participants explained that as first-generation students, it was valuable to gain support from those outside their
family as they did not have much information about college enrollment, recruitment, and college life. As for the key challenge they experienced, they admitted that despite awareness and inclusion efforts for the minority students, they still felt that a lack of understanding from their student peers. At times, they felt disconnected, as they struggled to build relationships with other students and faculty. Similarly, the STP staff expressed the vital need for first-generation students to have a support network because they tended to feel alone and left to fend for themselves without the knowledge base and limited exposure to higher education. Toyokawa and DeWald (2020) found that the limited support first-generation students receive results in internalized stressors that impact their decisions on courses to take, engaging with peers, and finances, which all impact their success in higher education. Terry and Clark-Fobia (2019) further posited that not having support networks hinders future employment opportunities because these students fail to develop social networks vital to professional development.

*Campus culture.* Finally, to persist and survive, the interviewed students again highlighted the value of support as they shared how by maintaining connections with professors and peers, the students were able to persevere successfully. Specifically, all five participants also noted how having minority professors or educators who can understand them was a big help. The students expressed concerns with persisting stereotypes and inappropriate behaviors demonstrated by majority students without reprimand by campus leaders.

*Observation Findings*

According to Creswell (2018), observations are qualitative research tools allowing the researcher to witness the attitudes and behaviors of the researched subjects in their
field setting. I observed an elective course for the general student body but a mandatory class for all Eagle University STP students. An adjunct instructor taught the three-semester hour course. The class I observed met on Thursday afternoon for one hour on Eagle University’s campus. The participants were twelve students: three Blacks, two Latin American, one Asian American, and six White students. The lecturer was White. An immediate observation was the selective student seating. The Black students sat together, and all the remaining students sat in other areas. This self-segregating of the Black students is what Bergen et al. (2020) described as a behavior for the marginalized student to find and maintain a safe haven. The lecture for that day was on professional development. While the instructor attempted to stimulate conversation, I observed that instead of interacting with the general class, the first-generation, Black students whispered amongst themselves. Strayhorn (2018) and David et al. (2019) equated this with self-doubt and a lack of self-efficacy. This same self-doubt was also observed in the focus group session. In this fifty-minute class, I observed how the instructor tried to connect with the class but could see that all students need to be fully engaged with one another to create a connection and expand the perceived safe haven. This observation was instrumental to this research because it allowed me to see how first-generation, Black students safeguard themselves in a classroom setting. This behavior is done to prevent themselves from confronting the feelings associated with that self-efficacy question of do I belong (Broom, 2019; David et al., 2019).

Data Analysis Findings: Synthesized Case Findings

The data analysis uncovered the major themes to describe the challenges these first-generation, Black students encounter in the campus environment. The first theme
encompassed the students’ shared experience of not feeling a sense of belonging in the university environment. The second theme addressed the students’ expressions of the need for a support system. The third addressed the importance of an inclusive campus culture. Each of these components helps to understand the research question.

*Theme 1: Belonging*

The major theme that received the greatest number of instances (# 69) in the data analysis was their perceived lack of understanding from the university staff and faculty. The finding under this theme is students did not feel understood by university faculty and support staff; therefore, they did not feel like they belonged. During the focus group, the participants explained that although they recognized the university made an effort to make the minority students feel welcomed and included, they still felt misunderstood and disconnected.

Students reported feeling disconnected from the ecosystem as they formally entered and interacted with the university. Through this discussion, the students expressed their understanding of their responsibility to adjust and be flexible as they interacted with all ethnicities, races, and cultures within the community or university. As an example, Thomas stated “I understand that I have to be a bit patient with some of my peers because some of them have never had friends who were African American.” This is noteworthy as the students recognized the need for flexibility and accommodation, but they did not feel that other student populations were making those same concessions for them. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) assertion that every individual engages and responds to their environment differently.
Similarly, Thomas echoed how minority students usually battle the sense of belongingness and inclusiveness. Along with this challenge, the difficulty of the course or program must also be navigated by the minority students. Hence, this participant shared how he would try to work with the students and ensure that they were performing as they should. From experience, Thomas stated:

I think them battling through that sense of belonging and feeling like you know I do belong here courses are challenging. They’re meant to be challenging, but I can do and I say [name of student] because it’s often emails, text, whatever the case may be, trying to get them just to come in office and talk about what’s going on, though those are typically the students that I see, they’re struggling silently and we don’t see them until. But they haven’t talked to their professors.

Lastly, Mary stated how there are minority students who would stay away from their professors and face difficulties and problems without telling them. The participant commented: “Oftentimes, they’re not going to class, and we don’t see them until they’re dragging until two or three weeks before class is over.” As the students did not feel a sense of belonging or connection to the faculty, they were reluctant to engage or ask for assistance from them. Bergen et al. (2020) explained this phenomenon as the marginalized student’s attempt to remain in a state of safety and comfort, avoiding uncomfortable confrontation with the faculty.

The interviews with the STP staff resulted in additional supporting commentary for this finding. Naomi explained, first-generation, Black students typically lacked a sense of belonging among their peers and generally with the campus culture. Naomi noted how the background or culture of the student caused them to perceive things differently, which may have affected their academic experience. However, Luke also shared that the faculty members were attempting to help students navigate and negotiate the process.
I guess the other challenges I would speak of be that sense of belonging having a connection to people that look like them, that. Understand you know that background we know that everyone has a unique life experience that brings in certain things that they might see and interpret and perceive differently than others. But at the same time often you know we share common commonality of understanding of certain things, and sometimes students struggle to find people on campus that might be able to empathize with and recognize the challenges that they experience outside of the classroom and so helping students demonstrate how to negotiate with themselves how to negotiate through some of those challenges, but also just how to push through and overcome you.

Stout et al. (2018) concluded that first-generation, Black students find meaningful relationships with professors and peers when they can connect with them academically and socially. The participants in the focus group and the STP staff interviews shared their experiences of such failed connections. The student’s lack of connection in the university ecosystem resulted in further isolation, causing them to deem the postsecondary journey too challenging to navigate. A lack of connections fueled the lack of a sense of belonging, contributing to a negative impact on student success, answering, in part, my research question: How does the university ecosystem impact first-generation Black student success?

Theme 2: The Need for Support Groups

The second major theme of the study discussed the importance of a support system for guidance and motivation. Universities have implemented programs to address this need generically for first-generation students, especially during the recruitment and enrollment processes, but it is not enough to meet the unique needs of the Black student population (McFarland et al., 2020). Blanket support systems for all first-generation students are insufficient at meeting the myriad of barriers faced by first-generation, Black students on the postsecondary journey. The finding for this theme is a need for tailored,
specialized support systems that last throughout the post-secondary journey to support the unique needs of first-generation Black students.

Regarding the support needed during the enrollment process, students described their approach to finding resources within their communities. As first-generation Black students, they recognized they have familial support to offer information on the admission process, financing options, or college life in general. Recognizing the need for such support, the students admitted they searched for guidance from those who could provide valuable instructions and assistance in navigating college life. As Thomas explained, he needed help from high school coaches, parents of his friends, and other teachers as his grandparents, who raised him, did not attend college:

My high school coaches kind of helped me navigate college. Because my grandparents really don’t know much about how to get to college. Another friend’s Mom helped me. Their parents helped me. A high school coach head coach, teachers at school.

Similarly, Mark echoed how his high school coach assisted him in the initial processes as he transitioned to college. At the same time, his girlfriend’s parents were also supportive regarding his financial needs and obligations. Mark shared his experience, saying:

So, then I get high school coach stepped in to help me out and figure out the process like pay for the housing deposit again my girlfriend’s parents. Back on my bill, the same people who are initially helping me are still in good contact with me just checking on me to see if I need anything OK.

The commonality in these student’s stories is powerful. Each of these participants described developing relationships with the parents of other students to fill the gap in support they so desperately desire and need to help them be successful in their academic pursuits. This parental deficit aligns with research by Stephens et al. (2015), which found students without parental guidance seek support from friends, counselors, teachers, and
coaches to fill the higher education knowledge and experience gap. The concern with non-familial support for these students is they did not find a university-provided support system with minority members with whom to build trust.

The behavior of reaching out to others for guidance was continued with a slightly different perspective with the next two participants. Ruth and Mark explained they filled this gap by engaging with the Scholars program. The scholar’s program is designed to encourage college level academic studies for marginalized students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds living in the rural regions of Northwest Virginia. The students explained how the program and its facilitators were present every step of the way or throughout their academic journey. Thomas commented: “The scholar’s program really cares for you and your experience at Eagle University. I like how they check in on us at least once, but usually more often every month.” Esther also echoed the statement, saying:

They literally did everything for us. They made us that. Sure, we were informed, kept us up to date with deadlines. They kept us aligned with filling out everything but making sure that we had every fee waiver that they can think of. So, they really gave us the benefit of the doubt.

The students commended these programs as they recognized the need for the services they provided. Mary emphasized the immense help that the program brought to her regarding her sense of belonging. During the focus group discussion, Mary mentioned that aside from the assistance they provided, she could also meet and connect with the other minority students. Mary narrated:

But I had no choice, but it was a very great program that allowed me to meet a lot of minority people and basically was able to connect and you know, make good friends and stuff during that program. It also allowed us to like grow and learn the campus as well as learn more about ourselves and then yeah, I would just say it was just a great support system and great just learning more about things like that.
Dias (2022) posited that first-generation students in a new environment sense isolation because they have few support networks helping them navigate the new environment. The students recognized the importance of connecting with faculty and staff as instrumental in feeling supported. Mark stated the value of communication between the students and professors, commenting: “It’s just making those connections with a professor that you like feel is either supportive or like you can like have that kind of conversation with your professor.” Adding to this theme, Ruth recounted how she connected with her peers and retained them over time, saying: “Oh, I was going to say like I just found it easier ‘cause I made the connection with the people I’ve met in STP like to transition. So, I still had those same friends.” Ruth and Mark’s narrative reinforced these students have awareness of the need for support, the negative impact of isolation, and the importance connections to support them in their educational journey.

In my research I found first-generation, Black students depend heavily on Eagle University’s Student Transition Program (STP) for moral and professional support. I found that Black students lacked connection with the other university students and professors, despite the effort to make them feel welcomed and included. Additionally, with limited exposure to the university ecosystem, first-generation, Black students perceived themselves even less qualified to participate in the university environment. STP assuages some of the anxiety and sense of isolation, and the participating students have come to appreciate the support. Eagle University’s STP currently has only two faculty to support in the broadest sense, over fifty students each academic year. After the obligatory year, the STP faculty try to continue helping students through their academic progression.
The students articulated the importance of having support, making connections, and establishing the network necessary for their success at Eagle University. This sentiment finds support throughout the literature. Allen et al. (2018), Bowman et al. (2019), Davidson et al. (2020), and Strayhorn (2018) all concluded the importance of support networks for first-generation student success in higher education. The participants of my research expressed the value of the support groups and expressed a need for more in order to positively impact their success in achieving graduation.

**Theme 3. Campus Culture**

The deficiency of Black faculty at PWIs has a lasting adverse impact on first-generation Black student success in higher education. Lige et al. (2016) posited that the absence of Black faculty facilitates further the perception that first-generation, Black students are outsiders and troublemakers, creating the conditions for crises with racial identity and low self-esteem amongst this group of students. Ultimately the student begins to doubt their academic psychological abilities Mondisa (2021) and Taylor et al. (2019) found in separate studies that first-generation, Black students experience an unwelcoming campus environment due to the nature of racial stereotypes and generally negative perceptions about first-generation, Black students. The finding for this theme is campus culture must align with the needs of the student body to prevent cultural dissonance and support the needs of first-generation Black students in academic success.

There is a need for diverse faculty and staff to mirror the multicultural nature of the current student demographic. Mary stated her experience with diversity in the faculty: “I guess pretty much I know like my time being here for the three years it’s been, I’ve
only had like two Black professors.” Ruth acknowledged the school’s effort in promoting diversity and inclusion:

This school advocates a lot of diversity, but what I’m actually seeing in experience is like not the same. Peers here, of course, is predominantly White and most of my professors that I had were predominantly White, whereas when I came from high school it was like a lot of people of color. So, whereas here I don’t really have that type of connection with like my professors and like faculty, ‘cause we can’t really resonate on certain levels because they don’t. You know the background yes, and the experience of being African American and like actually walking around on campus with predominately White people. So, all they have is their background, like they can’t tell me or give me any advice of much about my culture and my like life and like how like being Black.

Ruth’s observation and the way that she expressed the frustration, identified the impact of the lack of connection with her peers and professors due to the lack of diversity. She expressed a perception that the faculty and staff of a PWI ecosystem could not understand her because of the difference in socio-culture backgrounds. Her experience in two different universities, one PWI and one more diverse, explained the contrast in her sense of feeling understood.

The need for diversity of the campus staff and faculty extends beyond the student’s sense of belonging. Mary provided an example of how Black students feel unaccepted by some of their peers and unsafe on campus due to the culture of the campus. Mary narrated:

There was an incident where I think it was two Black guys got like, bombarded or something by two Whites and they were like, playfully like threatening them and supposedly had a gun or something. And the Black students were scared and after I heard about it but it’s just like stuff like that.

Mary described the intensity of the culture clashes occurring in the campus ecosystem. Even with a focus of diversity and inclusion prominent in the university’s strategic plan, the behaviors of the students described a culture where race issues are impacting the
psychological and physical safety of the minority students at PWIs. Such encounters occurring on campus make it more difficult for students to create a sense of belonging (Alberton, 2014; Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Roska & Whitley, 2017). In fact, such situations cause students to internalize negative stereotypes and perpetuate the feelings of self-doubt (Brown et al., 2017).

Thomas described the university campus as a “...sea of White...” because the majority White population dwarfs the number of Black students at Eagle University. This disproportionate demographic disposition causes a sense of isolation for some and anxiety for others. Making this situation worse is the number of Black faculty at Eagle University. The challenges of communication in the multicultural classroom and on the campus continue to present challenges for students and instructors alike. First-generation Black participants found it challenging to connect with other community members or university members. The isolation experienced with few peers and faculty who understand them and, making things more challenging, the perceived inability to communicate effectively causes first-generation, Black students to resign their pursuit of higher education.

Integrated within the campus culture are the elements of a hidden curriculum. Tinto (2017) identified the two primary factors impacting student retention as the academic system and the social system. The social system consists of those elements of the university culture, including peer groups, faculty interactions, and social networking (Braxton & McClendon, 2019). As a hidden curriculum resides in the social system with norms and traditions, the culture of the campus influences the student’s sense of integration and belonging. This is critical to the student’s decision to continue or
discontinue their post-secondary education. This is consistent with the works of Beattie (2018) who found the presence of the hidden curriculum was associated with negative academic outcomes, especially with minorities and those from poor backgrounds.

These factors related to campus culture have a negative impact on the emotional and psychological footing of these students just beginning their new journey (Howard, 2019). This kind of unwelcoming culture presents another weight on the shoulders of students already heavily burdened with the challenges of their new environment. In order to address the graduation rates of first-generation Black students, universities must address the campus culture.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

This qualitative case study was conducted with embedded analysis to examine how the university ecosystem impacts first-generation Black students’ success. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological theory provided a theoretical framework to explore the external factors impacting human development. By applying the theory to the campus ecosystem, I explored the environmental factors hindering student graduation rates. In this section, I discuss the importance of this study, my data analysis, and the results in the following section.

My literature review provided a broad perspective of seminal work and current research on the economic impact of an educated society. The opportunities and economic mobility a college degree supports, is a means by which the perpetual cycle of poverty ravishing Black households can be broken. Blacks are the largest racial group living in poverty, with an overall rate of 18.8% (Semega et al., 2021). While correlation does not equal causation, it is alarming that, currently, Black people are the largest ethnic group
living at or beneath the poverty line in the United States and have the lowest college graduation rates in the nation (Alberton, 2014; Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Grusky & Hill, 2018). Further, a 2017 Pew Research Study (Roska & Whitley, 2017) identified a correlation between a bachelor’s degree attainment and poverty rates amongst all ethnic groups of American society. The students in my research expressed the negative impact poverty and other environmental factors had on their perception of belonging in the university setting. As first-generation students, they lacked the reach back capability of finding support and knowledge necessary to successfully navigate their university journey, culminating in graduation.

Tinto (2017) concluded that there are two environmental factors having an impact on student retention: the academic system and the social system. The students and STP staff participating in my research also addressed these barriers from their own experiences. The students at Eagle University recognized that they may not have received the foundation necessary for success. Perhaps more assertively, they shared their need for a supportive social system during the transition to college and throughout the entirety of their academic journey. Both factors were clearly articulated by the students in my research.

My study focused on first-generation students. According to Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019), approximately 40% of students that entered college in 2018 were first-generation students. The number of first-generation students seeking higher education is growing and will continue to increase (Fairley-Pittman, 2019; Ives et al., 2020; Radunzel, 2021). Understanding the factors of a hidden curriculum is essential to maintaining higher education’s value proposition for future students.
The trustworthiness of these findings was solidified as the themes from each embedded unit of participants coincided with and corroborated with one another. My findings are that first-generation Black students struggle to find ways to feel at ease in the university ecosystem, which results in lower graduation rates. They fail to create connections with and feel a sense of belonging. The adverse condition of campus culture influences the students’ attitude, sense of self, and performance.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the individual is surrounded by many environmental systems that may, directly and indirectly, impact the individual. Through this research, I found that the main challenge of first-generation, Black students is the haunting feeling of isolation and a lack of understanding from the university’s staff stemming from the university environment. Based on the findings above, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) the ecosystem theory is pertinent in understanding how the campus environment impacts the experiences, and ultimately academic success, of first-generation Black students.

Recommendation 1: Wraparound Support

The first recommendation is to develop or expand support programs for the unique needs of each population of the student body, specifically, first-generation Black students. These vulnerable students require an outreach program immediately upon acceptance. Such programs should address a variety of needs identified in this research. Students require the ability to make connections to faculty, staff, and other students in the university ecosystem to begin to develop a sense of belonging. The findings of this research reinforce the work of Tinto (2017) and Bronfenbrenner (1977) in that it is necessary to provide tailored support programs to meet each student based on their
unique needs. The blanket approach to offering support is clearly not working for the students in my research. The key policymakers and decision-makers of the schools must consider a more robust method of evaluating the needs of first-generation students and design a flexible program tailored to these unique needs.

These support functions should focus on developing social skills among first-generation Black students through college initiation programs. The fact that participants realized the value of professor-student relationships and their lack of experience building relationships suggests that students should be equipped with social communicative skills upon entering college. As Montalto et al. (2019) stated, frustration and dropout intentions among Black first-year students set in because their lack of communication skills limits their ability to build relationships and leads to a sense of isolation.

McFarland et al. (2020) stated that new methodologies for addressing student support for the first-generation student are long overdue. Blanket support systems for all first-generation students are insufficient at meeting the myriad of barriers experienced by first-generation, Black students. Individualized supporting programs must be devised to meet the students where they are, both academically and psychologically. For example, Pratt et al. (2019) noted that mentorship programs that encompassed school counselors improved graduation rates due to consistent support and motivation. These support systems are necessary because they serve as another tool in making the student feel welcomed, respected, and understood (Strayhorn, 2019), developing that critical sense of belonging.
Recommendation 2: Establish/Expand Diversity Staffing and Sensitivity Programs

My second recommendation is to target the expanded search and acquisition of diverse talent for support, administration, and faculty roles. This recommendation comes from the shared responses of the study participants, wherein both the students and faculty members admitted the limited representation of people of color in their university’s faculty had a negative impact on student success. As society and student populations continue to become more diverse, the need for staffing that reflects the diversity of the student body is crucial. While there has been much attention to diversity and inclusiveness efforts, the current research provided evidence that despite these, Black students remain detached and disconnected. Additionally, the key stakeholders must find practical strategies to open the communication and create relationships between the students, faculty, and support staff to create a positive campus culture and enhance the sense of belonging. The students expressed their belief that faculty would be able to relate and connect to their needs better if they had the same background and experiences as them.

Recognizing that finding qualified candidates may be challenging in some areas, I offer a suggestion of using itinerant professors as an experimental first step. Often called visiting professors, these candidates can be employed on shorter term contracts and may not need to permanently relocate to the university. Instead, they can be rotating staff. After measuring the impact of such hires, full-time, longer-term contracts could be offered.

Revitalization efforts in improving an inclusive culture are necessary. Students and STP staff shared experiences of stressful and sometimes even dangerous interactions perpetuated on campus. Beattie (2018) noted students avoid building connections with
one another when prejudiced attitudes and behaviors exist among staff members. Therefore, dealing with the issue from the roots would play a chief role in helping the students acquire a sense of belonging.

New measures should be carefully developed to allow the university to measure this sub-group of the student body to ensure new staff generate improvements in student success rates. Continuing to conduct surveys or focus groups with the first-generation Black students would provide insight into the impact of this experiment. This approach would allow the universities to increase their diversity of candidates with lower financial barriers and offer an opportunity to measure the contribution to the student’s sense of belonging.

*Implications and Future Research*

The population of incoming college students is rapidly changing. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, a non-profit with a mission to conduct and report educational research, reported that between 2019–2020 there was a 6% drop in undergraduate student enrollment (NSCRC, 2022). In the United States, after the 2008 economic recession, the childbirth rate decreased by 500,000 children between 2008–2017, resulting in a dramatic change in student demographics in higher education.

Surprisingly, through immigration and higher-than-average birth rates, first-generation Hispanics seeking a post-secondary education continue to rise exponentially (Grawe, 2018, 2020; Kline, 2019). This decline equates to a 15% decline in undergraduate enrollment in the United States (Kline, 2019). In supplemental writings, Grawe (2021) posited that the magnitude of this demographic shift, the steady decrease in international students seeking education in the United States, and the questioning of the cost/value of a
college degree presents the ingredients that can shake the sustainability of institutions of higher education.

While the traditional undergraduate population is edging downward, first-generation student enrollment continues to increase. Cataldi et al. (2018) and Grawe (2018) posited that the number of first-generation undergraduates continues to grow with Hispanics and Asians leading the growth spike. Startz (2022) reported 40% of incoming post-secondary students are first-generation students, and for the foreseeable future, this group represents both a sizeable and stable inbound undergraduate population. As Grawe (2021) concluded, the majority of incoming students identify as first-generation and either Hispanic, Asian, or Black. The foreseeable market for higher education is the first-generation, minority student (Cataldi et al., 2018; Grawe, 2018, 2021; Startz, 2022) which requires universities to take note and make changes to prepare for this new student body.

The findings of my research provide insight into the barriers perceived by first-generation, specifically Black students experience in the current condition of campus culture. These findings serve as a wake-up call for university administrators and stakeholders as demographic data highlights the emerging market that, if nurtured, can stabilize the pending undergraduate enrollment storm. If university administrators and stakeholders ignore this emerging reality, the university will continue to struggle with poor outcomes for first-generation black students. This lack of awareness or understanding equates to Black collegians dropping out of college and returning to economically depressed neighborhoods with neither a degree nor skills to break poverty’s perpetual cycle. These students will take home a steep first or second-year financial aid
bill that will hinder their upward economic potential. Failing to recognize the reality or first-generation fiscal potential will further jeopardize financial footing due to an ever-decreasing revenue stream generated from those first-generation students. Cataldi et al. (2018) and Grawe (2021) described the demographics of students in higher education as starting to look much different than that of traditional predominantly White institutions (PWIs). As soon as 2025, PWIs will experience the magnitude of this demographic shift, with their student populations looking considerably different as first-generation, Hispanic, Asian, and Black students lead this new, inbound population (Cataldi et al., 2018; Grawe, 2021).

This new demographic represents first-generation students who genuinely desire successful outcomes in all post-secondary educational experiences. Failing to meet these students as they assimilate or integrate into the new higher education ecosystem inflames the sense of belonging that first-generation students desperately need to succeed (Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Grawe, 2021; Smith et al., 2020; Suhlmann et al., 2018). First-generation university students who do not feel they belong either transfer to another institution or give up on higher education (Bowman et al., 2019; Mwangi, 2018; Tinto, 2017). Inaction to changing campus culture to prepare for this foretold demographic shift is consequential to all stakeholders. University preparation, including those recommended in my research, is necessary to prepare to capture this new market for higher education (Kline, 2019). Lastly, my research seeks to understand how the hidden curriculum impacts the graduation rates of first-generation Black university students because understanding this complex issue facilitates corrective action. The second and third-order effects of this corrective action allow these young collegians the
opportunity to break that perpetual cycle of poverty (Chetty et al., 2020; Creamer et al., 2022; Winship, 2021). The findings in my study are consequential to the success of first-generation Black students and their efforts to attain higher education. Additionally, the findings are especially relevant to the leaders of institutions of higher learning. The content of my study is also a great addition to the literature as I included the voices of the first-generation Black students’ actual needs, experiences, and conditions. This study is unique in that I produced findings from both the perceptions and experiences of the first-generation Black students and the staff who served them, witnessing the struggles and successes of the said population.

Knowing the shifting demographic profile of future students, the problem of first-generation student success needs additional attention. Future qualitative researchers should consider replicating similar research but expanding the participant group to include a larger population of students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, performing one-on-one interviews would result in richer data that might provide additional insight into this complex problem. An ethnographic study, for example, could find a deeper understanding of a family ecosystem’s attitudes, behaviors, and cultural underpinnings from the student’s point of view, offering additional insight into recommendations to improve student academic success. Further, longitudinal studies that follow students starting in their high school years and through the entire post-secondary journey would offer awareness of the efficacy of implementation of the recommendations in my study. To break the cycle of poverty and increase graduation rates, further research is needed to explore the circumstances and experiences of students who end their post-secondary education before graduation.
Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of my study was to understand the perceived impact of a hidden curriculum on the graduation rates of first-generation Black students at public universities. To break the perpetual cycle of poverty ravishing Black households in the United States, we must create opportunities for economic mobility through the attainment of a college degree (Allen et al., 2018; Redden, 2020; Winship et al., 20121). Black families represent 8.5 million people living in poverty (Creamer et al., 2022; Semega et al., 2019; Tamir, 2020) and the lowest student college graduation rates (Causey et al., 2022; de Brey et al., 2019; Hanson, 2022; Taylor, 2020). These two factors contribute to the perpetuation of long-reaching problems in American society including limiting the employable workforce, expanding wealth gaps, growing public health concerns, and even inequality in the criminal justice system (Chetty et al., 2020; Peterson & Mann, 2020).

Universities currently struggle to meet the needs of this vulnerable population while facing a sea of demographic change in their coming student enrollment (Cataldi et al., 2018; Grawe, 2018). Universities must adjust the campus culture and address issues of a hidden curricula to address these issues. The foreseeable market for higher education is the first-generation, minority student (Cataldi et al., 2018; Grawe, 2018, 2021; Startz, 2022) which requires policymakers at universities to change to prepare for this new student body.

This qualitative case study with embedded units gave voice to the student experience at a public university using focus groups, semi-structured interviews, observations, and data review. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory provided a theoretical framework to explore the environmental factors of the campus, allowing for thematic analysis. Through this analysis, I found the studied population described a
shared lived experience in the campus ecological system that hindered their ability to thrive and succeed. I identified three overarching themes: sense of belonging, need for support groups, and campus culture. Within these themes, I identified three findings. The first finding is students did not feel understood by university faculty and support staff; therefore, they did not feel like they belonged. Next, the students expressed a need for tailored, specialized support systems that last throughout their post-secondary education journey. Finally, the campus culture must align with the needs of the student body to prevent cultural dissonance.

The primary stakeholders for my study are the policy makers at public universities. Understanding the implications of a poor campus culture on graduation success should be of utmost concern for universities trying to remain financially viable. This requires public college policy makers to expand programs, author directives, and allocate funding to guide the development and implementation of support programs that provide Black first-generation students with ample support and guidance. Knowing the coming shift in student demographics makes this study even more compelling. Improving campus culture and a hidden curriculum through the implementation of new programs and expansion of more diverse employees, first-generation Black students will begin to feel a sense of belonging and succeed. The key stakeholders are at the forefront of this critical shift needed to improve graduation rates, break the cycle of poverty, and ultimately begin the shift to realize the economic potential of the Black community.
CHAPTER FOUR
Distribution of Findings

Executive Summary

Despite college education being the most reliable means of developing the capability to seize economic opportunities (Beattie, 2018; Brooms, 2016; Campbell et al., 2019), the existence of a hidden curriculum has made it increasingly challenging to do so. This is especially true for first-generation, Black students at public universities. A hidden curriculum creates barriers that prevent these students from graduating and successfully reaping the opportunities that accompany education. These opportunities include higher wages as well as stable and secure employment. For Black people, the coveted college education serves as an escape from the clutches of poverty regardless of proximity (Montalto et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2018).

Strayhorn (2018) affirmed the significance of earning a college degree by asserting a college degree is a means to advance both the individual and the race. The presence of a hidden curriculum has mostly been associated with negative academic outcomes among minority students that come from poor backgrounds (Beattie, 2018). Throughout history, a hidden curriculum was intentionally used as a technique to withhold information and repress selected populations from achieving equality in society (Taylor et al., 2019). Clearly, this hidden curriculum is still creating a barrier for some populations of students. First-generation Black college students have the lowest baccalaureate degree completion rates compared to other racial or ethnic groups (de Brey et al., 2019).
Beyond the impact on the individual and the race, the economic costs of the barriers imposed by a hidden curriculum are substantial. In America, there is a significant wealth gap between White and Black people (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997). Peterson and Mann (2020) asserted the gross domestic product of the United States experienced an unrealized gain of $16 trillion dollars between 2000 and 2020 due to the lack of education in Black populations. Without education, individuals are unable to close the generational wealth gap and society as a whole misses out on the opportunity to grow and prosper.

In this research, I gave voice to the first-generation, Black students attending a predominantly White university. I explored the campus environment through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory. I gathered information to explore the lived experience of the first-generation Black students and how those ecological factors influenced their education successes. I sought to answer the following research question: How does the university ecosystem impact first-generation Black student success?

Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

This qualitative case study with embedded units explored the experience of first-generation Black students in a campus ecosystem. The case was bound to one institution. Primary data collection occurred between April 2022 through May 2022. Data collection methods employed for this research were semi-structured interviews, a focus group, direct observation, and document reviews. The embedded units were comprised of students ($n=5$), university support staff ($n=2$), and observation ($n=12$). I used Yin’s (2016) five step thematic analysis process and Creswell and Poth’s (2018) spiral analysis technique to determine themes and patterns across the textual data.
The case study design made it possible for me to gather varying rich perspectives from different subjects, thereby reducing instances of researcher generalization (Yin, 2018). Further, Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory served as the framework for this study. The ecological theory provided this research provided a lens, making it possible to examine the external factors impacting learning, development, and achievement among first-generation Black college students. My research resulted in three themes of belonging, campus culture, and support groups.

**Summary of Key Findings**

Each of my three themes resulted in findings that contribute to the body of knowledge and give light to the lived experiences of the studied population. I found participating students described a shared lived experience in the campus ecological system that hindered their ability to thrive and succeed. The dominant theme was the lack of a sense of belonging in the campus environment. In fact, 41% of the student responses related to this theme. The finding under this theme is students did not feel understood by university faculty and support staff; therefore, they did not feel like they belonged.

In the theme of the need for support groups, 30% of the student responses addressed examples of their attempts to create support networks where none existed. As first-generation students, reaching back to their families for guidance on navigating a hidden curriculum was not an option—there was no historical knowledge to glean (Gofen, 2009). The lack of familial support drove them to make the effort to connect with other resources such as campus staff, peers, and even the parents of other students. In the campus environment, support systems lacked the specificity and longevity the students required. The finding for this theme is a need for tailored, specialized support systems.
that last throughout the post-secondary journey to support the unique needs of first-generation Black students.

Finally, the theme of campus culture resulted in the remaining 28% of responses. The students gave heartbreaking examples of their experiences with racially charged interactions with their majority peers. Although the university took steps to create a safe and nurturing environment, the students still felt uneasy. The students also expressed the inability to connect with faculty and staff due to the racial and socioeconomic differences between them. The students explained that the university staff and faculty do not look like them and the students were unable to find common ground with them. The STP staff interviews offered additional insight into this problem with their own examples and stories of their efforts to help the students adapt to this new environment found on campus. The finding for this theme is campus culture must align with the needs of the student body to prevent cultural dissonance and support the needs of first-generation Black students in academic success.

*Implications and Recommendations*

The findings of my research have far-reaching implications for Black students, the Black population, the universities that serve them, and the economy of the United States in general. My research is a call to action for university policy makers to improve the ecological setting of the university through addressing a hidden curriculum to create an inclusive campus culture. The voices heard in my research offer insight into the barriers that hindered first-generation Black student success. I proposed two data driven recommendations derived from the three themes of my research (see Table 9). University leaders must embrace these recommendations to address the needs of these students.
Table 9
Themes, Recommendations, and Implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Students do not feel understood by university faculty and support staff</td>
<td>Wraparound Support. Universities must develop or expand programs to connect with these students on a personal level immediately upon their notice of acceptance and through the post-secondary journey.</td>
<td>Startz (2022) reported 40% of incoming post-secondary students are first-generation students. Grawe (2021) concluded, first-generation students are the majority of incoming students seeking higher education with Hispanics, Asians, and Black students leading this new demographic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Groups</td>
<td>Students described their need and appreciation for support during their first year but clearly expressed interest programs that last through the post-secondary journey.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Culture</td>
<td>STP staff and students reported a campus culture that reverberates cultural dissonance</td>
<td>Universities must establish/expand diverse staffing and programs.</td>
<td>Internalized racism experienced in the university ecosystem creates conflict and confusion for Black students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first recommendation is universities must develop or expand programs to connect with first-generation Black students on a personal level immediately upon their notice of acceptance and throughout their post-secondary journey. This requires public college policy makers to author directives and allocate funding to guide the development and implementation of programs that provide Black first-generation students with ample support and guidance. I posed a novel recommendation of experimenting with itinerant professors to explore measurable improvement in campus culture and student retention. Grawe (2021) concluded, first-generation students are the majority of incoming students
seeking higher education with Hispanics, Asians, and Black students leading this new demographic.

My second recommendation is universities must establish or expand diversity staffing and sensitivity programs. There is a critical need for more diversity in roles of support, administration, and faculty, to better match the student body. As society and student populations continue to become more diverse, the need for staffing that reflects the diversity of the student body is crucial. Additionally, an investment in programs to improve the inclusivity of campus culture is necessary. Students and STP staff shared experiences of stressful and sometimes even dangerous interactions perpetuated on campus. If unresolved, the racism present in the university ecosystem will continue to perpetuate self-doubt and create conflict and confusion for the first-generation, Black students.

**Findings Distribution Proposal**

My goal is to improve the first-generation Black student experience in higher education to increase graduation rates. Public universities should offer an environment that embraces these students, meeting their unique needs of diverse support. By creating the needed ecological system changes, students will experience a sense of belonging and have resources available to create a sense of belonging. By increasing the number of first-generation Black graduates, the equity gap can begin to close.

**Target Audience**

The target audience for my research findings is the board of governors across public universities and colleges in Virginia. According to Wheelahan and Moodie (2021), the board of governors not only determines the mission of public colleges but also set the
strategic directions that govern institutional performance. This makes them suitable for driving the recommendations, which mostly involve the designing of professional and institution operation policies and funding. This audience has the potential for utilizing the findings to influence change in professional practice given that being high in the hierarchy can make policy decisions that will influence the graduation rates of first-generation Black students. The positive results acquired will trigger other colleges to adopt similar professional practice principles.

On a more local level, I intend to share these results with the leaders of Eagle University. While they recognized the need for special support programs such as the Student Transition Program, gaps still exist. The need for more robust and even wrap around services to support first-generation, Black students through the entire education journey is clear. My findings and recommendations offer actionable steps to further support these students. The recommendations will improve metrics commonly measured at universities such as retention, student success, and graduation rates, especially with the first-generation Black communities within the student body.

Proposed Distribution Method and Venue

The proposed distribution method is a professional presentation to the College Boards of Visitors across public colleges in the United States. I will begin at Eagle University. This body holds standing meetings on a semi-annual basis to address matters related to long-term planning and budget plans for the university. I intend to present these findings at the next session, scheduled for March 2023. I will meet with the President’s Leadership Council to deliver the findings of this research in a 40-minute presentation using PowerPoint. The goal of the presentation is to bring attention to the critical
imperative for first-generation Black students and convince the board of visitors to accept and approve budgets to implement the study’s informed recommendations.

Conclusion

This study concluded that existing campus ecosystems, including a hidden curriculum, are negatively impacting first-generation Black college students. These factors contributed to lower rates of degree completion compared to other racial or ethnic groups (Goodman & Cook, 2019; de Brey et al., 2019; Tinto, 2017). The findings of this study call on leaders of institutions of higher learning to consider the needs of first-generation students, the Black population specifically, and develop support programs and a campus culture to help them navigate a hidden curriculum. Historically, a hidden curriculum served to keep populations in their place (Pratt et al., 2019). Sustaining these ecosystem barriers hinders the Black population from achieving advanced education, thus preventing them from achieving economic mobility. The impact to society is measured in the missed opportunities of the Black contribution to the country’s gross domestic product as well as the cost associated with social support programs (Chetty et al., 2020; Peterson & Mann, 2020). This is a mission critical issue for our country. Until we can offer all members of society an equal opportunity for education, we cannot leverage the full economic power of our population.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flier

Study Participants Needed

There is a new study called “Mission Critical: A Qualitative Study on Improving Graduation Success for First-Generation Students at Public Universities” that could explore the factors of a hidden curriculum impacting the successful graduation outcomes of first-generation university students. For this study, you are invited to participate in the focus group discussion.

This study is part of the doctoral study for Michael Hubbard, an Ed.D. student at Baylor University.

About the study:
- Participants will be asked to do the following tasks:
  - Participate in a focus group discussion (60 minutes).

Volunteers must meet these requirements:
- 18 years old and above
- African American ethnicity
- First-generation student identification

To confidentially volunteer, email the researcher at:
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about the factors of a hidden curriculum impacting first-generation Black college students’ successful graduation outcomes at a public university in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The students from the incoming student program to be in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Michael Hubbard, who is a doctoral student at Baylor University.

**Background Information:**
The purpose of this study is to explore the factors of a hidden curriculum impacting first-generation Black college students’ successful graduation outcomes at a public university in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

**Procedures:**
This study involves:
- Participating in a focus group discussion (60 minutes)
- OR
- Participating in a one-on-one interview (60 minutes)

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**
Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. You will be treated the same at the university whether or not you join the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. I seek no more than ten volunteers for this study.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**
Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue or stress in completing the interview. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by exploring the factors of a hidden curriculum impacting first-generation Black college students’ successful graduation outcomes at a public university in the Commonwealth of Virginia.
Payment:
There will be no payment for participation in this study.

Privacy:
I am required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. This only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Baylor University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). I will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If I were to share this data Ecological Theory with another researcher in the future, I am required to remove all names and identifying details before sharing; this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by storing in a password-protected computer only accessible to me. Data will be kept for a period of at least three years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:
You can ask questions of me, Michael Hubbard. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Baylor University’s Research Participant Advocate at (254) 315-0473.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask me or Baylor University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by responding “I consent” to the email or by e-signing below.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant’s Signature

Researcher’s Signature
APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

This semi-structured interview guide/protocol aims to understand how the university ecosystem impacts first-generation Black student success. Interviews with the student transition program staff helped to gain a deeper understanding of this complex issue.

1. Welcome/Introduction
2. Review the task, purpose, and voluntary nature of the interview
3. Question 1: Tell me about your experiences in higher education.
4. Question 2: Based on your experiences/observations, what challenges do first-generation students experience upon arrival at Eagle University?
5. Question 3: How are the integration challenges different between Black first-generation students and other first-generation students?
6. Question 4: How does the student transition program assist first-generation students?
7. Question 5: How do you measure the effectiveness of the student transition program?
8. Question 6: How would you describe the university culture towards first-generation students?
9. Question 7: How can the university enhance first-generation experiences with both faculty and peers?
APPENDIX D

Focus Group Protocol

This semi-structured focus group protocol aims to understand how the university ecosystem impacts first-generation Black student success.

1. Welcome/Introduction
2. Review task, purpose, and voluntary nature of focus group
3. Question 1: Tell me a little about yourself, your dreams, and aspirations?
4. Question 2: Tell me about your decision to attend college?
5. Question 3: Tell me about your family?
6. Question 4: Tell me about your experiences thus far at the university?
7. Question 5: Tell me about what you see as challenges as a first-gen?
8. Question 6: Tell me about your experiences with campus life?
APPENDIX E

Observation Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Behavioral Observation Protocol</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date/Time of Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Attendees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographic observations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student engagement to session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student behavior upon entering the session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student seating choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student interaction with each other</td>
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<td>Student interaction with each other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student interaction with staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other behavioral notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notes on words used, statements made.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


APPENDIX F

Baylor Institutional Review Board Approval

Baylor University

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD – PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

NOTICE OF DETERMINATION OF NON-HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH

Principal Investigator: Michael Hubbard
Study Title: Mission Critical: A Qualitative Study on Improving Graduation Success for African American First-Generation Students at Public Universities
IRB Reference #: 1896913
Date of Determination: April 04, 2022

The above referenced research project has been determined to not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to federal regulations at 45 CFR 46.102(e) & (l). Specifically, the sample size is insufficient to generate generalizable findings.

The following documents were reviewed:

- IRB Application, submitted on 04/04/2022
- Protocol, submitted on 04/04/2022

This determination is based on the protocol and/or materials submitted. If the research is modified, you must contact this office to determine whether your modified research meets the definition of human subject research.

If you have any questions, please contact the office [Redacted].

Sincerely,

[Redacted]
Deborah L. Holland, JD, MPH, CHRC, CHPC
Assistant Vice Provost for Research, Research Compliance
https://www.lexisnexis.com/community/casebrief/p/casebrief-adams-v-richardson#:~:text=The%20court%20concluded%20that%20a,statewide%20systems%20of%20higher%20learning


