"I SIGNED THE FORM, AND I JUST WALKED OUT": A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT STOP OUT AND RETURN BEHAVIOR

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# ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study sought to understand reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more. This research was guided by the following questions: What experiences contributed to the student's withdrawal from the institution? What experiences contributed to the student's return to the institution? What retention strategies and programs were used during the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes? The participants' lived experiences were applied to two theoretical frameworks: Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT and Student Departure Theory were used to understand the reasons and influences for Black or African American students' departure and return at various points in their academic journey. The participants' lived experiences revealed several key findings. Black students had difficulty transitioning to college due to their high schools' lack of resources, leading to the lack of sufficient preparation for the rigors of college—stressors and barriers to completion, such as poor academic and social adjustment to the campus environment and limited to no connection with faculty, staff, or support services. Off-campus employment contributed to the student's departure from college. The lack of job advancement contributed to the student's return to complete their degrees. Most participants found reenrolling back into college challenging as no formal process was established.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

College and university administrators are being challenged to find viable solutions to increase retention and persistence while decreasing student attrition. Specifically, these challenges are reflected in the reduced graduation rates of student populations, such as first-generation, low-income, and minoritized students of color. Adjusting the culture of postsecondary institutions and recognizing the impending demographic shift in the United States population could serve as a starting point to reduce the rate of student non-completion occurring in the university sector. Students who leave before they complete their degree can cost universities thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition revenue and replacement recruiting costs (Millea et al., 2018). Higher education institutions receive less funding from the federal and state governments and are more reliant on tuition dollars, leaving students and their families to foot the bill and question the value of a college degree. Research has shown that nearly 36 million Americans (mainly adults) have some college education but no degree (Mattern et al., 2015; Nadworny & Larkin, 2019). Although the logical and easier strategy may be to focus on students who are already enrolled, adults returning to college may offer a huge opportunity for colleges to increase their retention and graduation rates (Nadworny & Larkin, 2019).

This phenomenological qualitative study will examine students' experiences who left a four-year public institution and returned after being unenrolled for one year or more. Research

studies on student attrition, retention, and persistence have been primarily quantitative in nature. A limited number of researchers have focused on the attendance behaviors of students at postsecondary institutions. To add to the existing literature, this study examines stop-out and return behavior from a qualitative lens using Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and critical race theory (Delgado et al., 2017). Mattern et al. (2015) asserted,

> A one-size-fits all approach to developing an intervention does not appear to be the answer to an institution's problem. Rather, a targeted intervention that focus [sic] specifically on the needs of the individual student are more likely to effectively increase overall retention rates. (p. 35)

It is necessary to gain an in-depth insight into how to reduce the withdrawal rate and reduce barriers for students who wish to return to finish their education. This study intends to understand the lived experiences of students who stop out and reenroll after an extended period to inform postsecondary administrators of the services necessary to increase retention and graduation rates.

Higher education institutions have been facing a decline in enrollment over several decades and are struggling to recruit new students and retain their current student body. This decline is a result of multiple factors. According to Kelderman and Gardner (2019), the decline started from lower birth rates and a decrease in high school graduates, which started about 20 years ago. The impending demographic shift is causing a rise in population among racial groups. "As a whole, the United States is expected to have a majority-minority population by 2043" (Kelderman & Gardner, 2019, p. 11). Students and their families are rethinking their decision to attend college because of the rising cost of tuition and the need to care for their families. Consequently, the decline in enrollment is due to less favorable institutional environments for

diverse student populations. Retaining students beyond the first year of enrollment does not come without challenges. Some factors can be influenced by institutional programming or incentives, but other factors are external or based on student-specific attributes (Millea et al., 2018). These factors involve student motivation, connectedness to the campus community or sense of belonging, and the effects of students' pre-college characteristics.

Student attrition and barriers to student success have long been a challenge at postsecondary institutions. Robbins et al. (2006) found students leave college before completion not only because of academic difficulties but also for various other reasons, such as adjustment problems, uncertain goals, inadequate finances, and lack of student involvement. With noncompletion rates on the rise, institutions need to dig deeper into understanding student experiences and be willing to implement effective strategies to correct the issues affecting attrition. Education must be accessible to people of increasing diversity whose lives have become significantly more complicated because of work and family demands and for whom the cost of transportation to and from campus is of increasing concern (Betts et al., 2019). "For students who are at risk of non-completion, whether they be first-generation students, students from an ethnic background or students with disabilities, learning to play the role of the higher education student is essential to academic success" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 42; see also O'Keeffe, 2013).

Literature on stop-out and return behavior should examine why retention programs are effective at one institution and not another. Transition and retention programs aim to help students attain their educational goals by assisting them in maneuvering through their academic and social challenges. There must be an attempt to look at institutions successfully implementing new strategies based on their desire to increase their low retention. Hoyt and Winn (2004) argued

that a different retention strategy would be warranted for colleges whose non-returning student population comprises mostly drop-outs or stop-outs versus one where nonreturners are mostly transfer-outs. Failure to address and curtail the attrition problem will lead to a continued loss of revenue for higher education institutions. Many colleges are not investing enough in the programs and services needed to help a more diverse group of students stay enrolled and graduate (Hoover, 2014). Those institutions willing to redefine themselves are rethinking how courses are being offered. Betts et al. (2019) postulated:

> [Although] traditional face-to-face programs will always play a critical role in higher education, online and blended programs provide new opportunities to expand current markets by offering quality programming that supports the institutional mission, increases brand recognition, and expands an institution's alumni base. (p. 4)

### Statement of the Problem

Institutions of higher learning face extreme challenges to retain students and help them persist to graduation without interruption. The high student dropout rate between the first and second year of college is a significant concern for most colleges and universities. Learning what is causing students to withdraw and return and implementing successful retention strategies is critical to addressing the decline in enrollment. Enrollment managers and other college administrators have a vested interest in the retention of students, as they want to ensure the money, time, and effort spent on recruiting will positively affect graduation rates. To close the gap in student attrition, institutions must examine the effectiveness of their retention programs and support services, address academic and personal barriers, and implement value-adding initiatives to increase student success.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more.

**Research Questions**

The goal of this study is to describe the phenomenon of student attrition and to explore the experiences that lead undergraduates to stop out and return to continue their postsecondary education. This study aims to answer the following research questions: 1. What experiences contributed to the student's withdrawal from the institution? 2. What experiences contributed to the students' return to the institution? and 3. What retention strategies and programs were used during the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes?

**Significance of the Study**

Higher education institutions face extreme challenges in retaining students beyond their first year of enrollment. These institutions must reduce the barriers students face before enrolling and during their first year of college to ensure they persist in graduation. Hildreth (2017) noted as the population and the percentage of high school graduates increasingly includes Hispanic/Latino, Black, low-income, and first-to-college groups, vulnerable colleges will need to address the impediment to attracting, enrolling, and graduating them. Institutions need to dig deeper to understand student experiences and be willing to implement effective strategies to correct issues affecting drop-out and stop-out behavior. Howard (2007) believed that for education leaders to engage in this transformative work, they must first build trust, engage in

personal culture, confront social dominance and social justice issues, transform instructional practices, and engage the entire school community.

## Personal Statement

My interest in student attrition is based on my career and personal experiences. My identity as a Black female, first-generation college student who became an advising administrator has created an extensive connection to the research study. Reflecting on my development journey, I realize my experiences inside and outside of the classroom are equally important in shaping who I am as an individual, and how I use my experiences to influence others to pursue a college degree became extremely important to my work in higher education. For example, I became a parent soon after graduating from high school. Therefore, obtaining an education was my key to success and the means to provide a stable future for my daughter. I was allowed to attend college through the Education Opportunity Program, which offers academic support to economically and educationally disadvantaged students. The scholarship allowed me to complete my associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees.

While pursuing my bachelor's degree, I acquired four mentors, a nun and three Black women, who held me accountable to obtaining my degree and recognized my potential even before I knew it. I was encouraged to seek their assistance when experiencing challenges in school, work, or personal life. They were always there to listen and provide sound advice. The abundance of support I received in my undergraduate journey shaped my life and career purpose.

During my transition into higher education, I began to work with provisional and conditional admit students and eventually obtained various directorships within academic advisement. Early in my career, I thought my role was to ensure the students attended class and did well in college. I quickly realized it was much more than that. Working with students from

disadvantaged backgrounds is very challenging. I began to understand that students come to college with all the baggage from their home lives and environments. In working with students, you first need to help them resolve the issues they are facing unrelated to their education. In conducting this research, I aim to bring awareness to the gaps in the current strategies and processes used to retain students of color.

My passion for helping myself survive also sparked a passion for helping others succeed. It is my hope this study's results inform higher education administrators of the need to create programs to reduce the barriers students experience transitioning from high school and help to avoid stop out and re-enrolling into postsecondary environments.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

Withdrawal behavior is not permanent, and all definitions describing how it applies to students differ. A desire to use qualitative research in investigating student attrition will provide an opportunity to use students' lived experiences to create solutions to this growing problem. Transforming how strategies are implemented to retain students beyond their first year is a collaborative effort. Retention factors can be narrowed to student motivation, sense of belonging, and pre-college characteristics. To reduce attrition, senior leadership must make more effort to ensure students integrate academically and socially into the institutional environment. Failure to address and curtail the attrition problem will lead to a continued loss of revenue for higher education institutions.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more. Implications for practice in higher education will include colleges doing a better job of creating and implementing programs that would benefit at-risk students to make a college education more obtainable. Providing extensive training to academic personnel who interact with students at risk of withdrawing will prove beneficial to managing student success. It will prove beneficial to evaluate if institutional factors contribute to the decline of retention, such as an academic advising model, lack of tutoring services, or low employee engagement. Further research on withdrawal behavior needs to examine the effectiveness of withdrawal policies and if institutions are reducing barriers for students to return to the institution after an interruption.

**Factors Affecting Retention, Persistence, and Attrition**

Colleges and universities have been facing a decline in enrollment and are experiencing challenges to retain their current student body while recruiting new students. The goal of any higher education institution is to ensure that students persist in completing their education. The higher retention rates an institution can achieve, the more students it will maintain who will pay tuition and fees and generate academic achievements—all of which are imperative to institutional success (Burke, 2019). The revenue produced from tuition and fees contributes to

institutions' ability to provide enough programs and services to retain students. Retention should not be the institution's primary goal but the best indicator in meeting their goals of student satisfaction and success (Levitz et al., 1999). Levitz et al. (1999) pointed out, "It should measure how much students' growth and learning take place, how valued and respected students feel on campus, and how effectively the campus delivers what students expect, need, and want" (p. 31). Over the last few decades, many institutions have failed to meet their projected budget targets. Deficit budgets result in the inability to provide adequate support services, a possible reduction in funding from various sources, and a decline in the creation of programs or research initiatives.

Helping students persist in graduation remains a top priority for administrators. The push to continue these efforts is necessary to increase graduation and retention rates. Data in recent years have confirmed this disturbing trend. The national projection for enrollment over the next few decades is of great concern. As of 2016, more than two-thirds of private colleges and over 50% of public colleges failed to meet their enrollment or net tuition revenue (Hildreth, 2017). In a study on current-term enrollment estimates, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019) found the overall postsecondary enrollment decreased by 1.7% from the previous spring, and, as a whole, the public sector enrollment (2- and 4-year combined) declined by 1.9% compared to an increase of 3.2% in the private sector as of Spring 2019. In Fall 2020, just over 16% fewer freshmen enrolled (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; St. Amour, 2020), and enrollment of first-time, first-year students experienced a pandemic-injected 13.1% drop (NSCRC, 2021; Rich-Kern, 2021). More recently, the NSCRC (2021) reported that the total enrollment across higher education in 2021 was down 2.5% from fall 2020, and the population most affected was first-year students.

The decrease in enrollment can be attributed to various factors, with little improvement in the foreseeable future. These reasons include rising college costs, a decline in confidence in higher education, and a decline in the college-age population (Busteed, 2020). The enrollment decline has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining the possible causes of this ubiquitous problem will be necessary to strategize potential solutions since many institutions face a loss of tuition dollars and state appropriations. The mission of retention efforts is to provide a comprehensive, collaborative delivery model where each student is valued, respected, and encouraged to learn and grow through a student/advisor partnership to ensure students receive the resources and support needed to maximize individual success (Miami-Dade Community College, 2002). Committing to a student-centered strategic plan aligned with an institution's mission statement will reduce student attrition.

In the subsequent sections, I examine the foundation of student attrition in which renowned scholars interpret the student departure process. Next, I will explain the different types of dropouts that have produced several models of retention attempting to clarify student attrition and persistence. Finally, I address some common characteristics that have been proven to influence attrition.

**Foundations in Departure Literature**

The institutional priorities related to student attrition have shifted throughout history and have produced much literature on the dropout process. Ishitani (2003) described attrition as "a student's first spell of departure from the institution, which includes different types of departure, such as dropouts, transfers, academic dismissals, and stopouts (i.e., some departed students may return and resume their enrollment after a certain period of discontinuation)" (p. 439). In early literature, Spady (1970) examined "the dropout process from a variety of perspectives and

definitions based on Durkheim's theory of suicide that focused on student attributes, influences, expectations, and university environments" (p. 65). Spady defined a college dropout in two ways—the first as anyone leaving a college in which they had registered and the second as those who never received a degree from any college. The latter was the most traditional and was geared toward specific institutional policies defining all students as dropouts if they left college after their initial enrollment. Based on Spady's (1970) theoretical model rooted in Durkheim's suicide theory, Tinto (1975) attempted to explain "the processes of interaction between the individual and the institution that lead differing individuals to drop out from institutions of higher education and distinguished between those processes that result in different forms of dropout behavior" (p. 90). Durkheim and Tinto were theorists who provided the foundation for explaining drop-out behavior, but, to date, few researchers have thoroughly explained why students stop out and return.

Early research on student retention found that institutions blamed students for not completing their degrees rather than taking responsibility for their role in the fight against attrition (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) recognized that "students who did not stay were thought to be less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that college graduation was believed to bestow" (p. 2). Student retention in higher education concentrates on a specific group of students. Several student groups are considered to be at risk of not completing college: ethnic minorities, academically disadvantaged, disabled, low socioeconomic status, and probationary students (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Students would not complete their studies for various reasons, mainly due to their inability to succeed academically or personally or due to their failure to keep up with their financial obligations. Tinto (2012) considered it necessary to define what is meant by the term student retention and student persistence: "They are associated with one

another and directly related to how we think about student academic progress. Appropriately differentiating between both concepts will provide a better understanding of college enrollment" (p. 27). Tinto (2012) denoted:

> Persistence and completion are the rates at which students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree, regardless of where they do so. In the latter case, retention and graduation refer to the rate at which an institution retains and graduates students who first enter the institution as a freshman at a given point in time. (p. 127)

Early research on student attrition produced foundational retention models to explain departure behavior from various perspectives and definitions of why students leave college before receiving a degree. In 2000, Thayer studied several different models of retention that emphasized factors affecting students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds and found they explained student persistence and attrition. The models studied included Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration model, Astin's (1999) involvement model, and Bean's (1980) student attrition model. According to Thayer (2000), "The models recognized students brought several characteristics, experiences, and commitments to their college entry, including academic preparedness levels, parent educational attainment, aspirations for their children, socioeconomic statuses, and aspirations for learning and degree attainment" (p. 3). However, in Tinto's (1975) student integration model, "It was believed past research related to student attrition failed to differentiate between the various types of dropouts, such as those resulting from academic failure, voluntary withdrawal, transfer, or permanent withdrawal" (p. 89).

## Student Characteristics That Impact Retention and Persistence

The student dropout rate is a constant concern for postsecondary leaders. With such a large percentage of students failing to persist to graduation, it is no surprise to see an increase in efforts to identify factors related to student persistence (Harmston, 2004). Some common factors researched and proven to influence attrition behavior related to student departure are first-generation status, gender, financial aid status, high school achievement, educational experience, socioeconomic status, and institutional characteristics.

### First-Generation Status

The transition into postsecondary education is challenging for particular student populations, as with first-generation students. Soria and Stebleton (2012) defined first-generation college students as being from a family in which no parent or guardian has earned a baccalaureate degree. The number of first-generation students entering college has increased steadily over time, possibly signaling their determination to achieve a better socioeconomic status than their parents. Although going to college may be viewed as a rite of passage for many students, as a college degree becomes a prerequisite for jobs with higher salaries, first-generation students often face unique challenges in pursuing a college degree (Ishitani, 2003). However, Soria and Stebleton pointed out that first-generation students are often less prepared for the collegiate environment's complexity and worry about how they will pay for college. First-generation students have lower retention rates, lower grade point averages, less support from family members, and are more likely to leave college after their first year.

First-generation students experience higher attrition rates than their peers. Researchers have conducted many longitudinal studies to understand how factors influence persistence in first-generation students. Ishitani (2003) investigated the attrition behavior of first-generation

college students and students with two college-educated parents and found, for first-generation students, "the relative risk of departure in the first year was 71% higher, in the sixth semester, it was 22% less than the one for students with two college-educated parents and less pronounced in the third year" (p. 433). Pascarella et al. (2004) analyzed longitudinal data from 18 four-year colleges to understand the differences between first-generation and other college students' postsecondary education experience and outcomes. Results related to time to departure were similar to previous studies where first-generation students were more likely to leave college at the end of their first year, less likely to be on track for a degree after three years, and less likely to stay enrolled or complete after five years. As explained by Pascarella et al., a lack of understanding of the collegiate environment has contributed to the increased attrition rate of first-generation students compared to their peers.

First-generation parents cannot adequately guide students through the collegiate process because they lack social capital and are less engaged. Social capital resides in relationships among individuals who facilitate the transaction and transmission of different resources (Pascarella et al., 2004). Students with social capital in the college environment benefit from being engaged in the academic environment compared to those without it. Soria and Stebleton (2012) investigated differences in academic engagement and retention between first-generation and non-first-generation undergraduate students. They suggested first-generation students do not possess the same social capital levels vis a vis college as their non-first-generation peers and are likely to face more challenges in navigating the university and becoming engaged fully in their academic pursuits. In summary, the authors found first-generation students were less engaged in classroom discussions, less likely to interact with faculty during class sections, and less frequent in bringing up ideas and concepts from other courses.

Many engagement and persistence studies were conducted to compare first-generation students against their peers whose parents obtained a degree. Dong (2019) compared first-generation students' self-reported levels of engagement and outcomes with those of continuing-generation students at 16 private liberal arts colleges. In this study, first-generation students were mostly from three underrepresented groups (Black, Asian, and Hispanic), had declared an education major, and were more likely to accumulate loan debt to pay for their education. The findings identified some similarities between first-generation and continuing-generation students. Dong (2019) wrote:

> [First-generation students] benefited equally from college experiences in terms of overall gains in intellectual development, development of problem-solving, development of social and civic engagement, institutional preparation for graduate school, and interpersonal relationships and family living; first-generation status affected only one outcome—institutional preparation for a career path—for which first-generation students actually reported larger gains. (p. 30)

The first- to second-year persistence differences between first- and continuing-generation students resulted in differences in their primary language, degree attainment, and income. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) strove to understand better the differences between first-generation and continuing-generation students at four-year institutions. In households where the primary spoken language is not English, first-generation students were almost 15% less likely to persist than in families where English is the primary language. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) wrote:

> First-generation students with higher incomes were significantly more likely to persist than those with lower incomes, suggesting that lower-income first-generation students are not only disadvantaged by their parents' lack of experience with and information about

the college but also by other social and economic characteristics that constrain their educational opportunities. (p. 418)

Transitioning into college is most challenging for special student populations such as first-generation students. They experience higher attrition rates than their peers and lack the parental support to navigate the collegiate process. Having a first-generation status increases attrition behavior, but it is just as important to scrutinize how other characteristics, such as gender, play a role in student departure.

**Gender**

More attention is needed on factors contributing to the widening gender gap and its effect on persistence. The gender gap is relatively small at high school graduation; it grows larger among young adults who enroll in college conditional on completing high school or a General Educational Development (GED), and it is largest among people who complete college conditional on enrolling (Owens, 2016). Compared to 30 years ago, research has shown women are more likely than men to enroll in college and receive a degree. Mortenson (2008) found "33 percent of women between 25 and 29 had completed at least four years of college (a gain of more than 20 percentage points since 1970) while just over 26 percent of men had (a gain of 6.3 percentage points" (para. 2). Mortensen concluded boys' inability to get a college degree results from their failure to qualify for increased private-sector jobs, which requires education beyond high school due to lack of adaptation to societal changes, increased unemployment, and incarceration rates.

Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) studied the rising female advantage in college completion and reported that 28% of men and 33% of women completed a four-year college, and only 29% of men and women exclusively attended a four-year college. They attributed the decline in

college completion among males to having low-educated or absent fathers. They increased college completion among women due to less gender discrimination and superior academic performance. Keels (2013) suggested female students were significantly more likely to graduate than male students. Students with college-educated mothers were significantly more likely to graduate than those without college-educated mothers.

Some believe the age-old developmental and behavioral differences between men and women have caused a gender imbalance that favors women. Goldin et al. (2006) argued the decline in the male-to-female ratio of undergraduates during the past 35 years is not due primarily to changes in the ethnic mix of the college-aged population nor to the types of postsecondary institutions they attend. Goldin et al. (2006) wrote:

> The increased enrollment between men and women appeared to be brought about by the changing societal norms, "two key factors may have played a role in the female college advantage: relatively greater economic benefits of college for females and relatively higher effort costs of college-going and preparation for males. (p. 154)

The persistence gaps by sex differ by program, institution, and ethnicity. African American, Hispanic, and low-income males lag behind their female peers in terms of educational attainment and are far outpaced by White, Asian-American, and middle-class men and women (King, 2000). Keels (2013) reviewed enrollment data at selective colleges and universities, looking at gender and ethnicity disproportionality, and noted, "Four years post-enrollment, 63% of Black women and only 48% of Black men had graduated. Six years post-enrollment, 84% of Black women and 73% of Black men had graduated; this is the only ethnic group for which there was a significant unadjusted gender gap" (p. 313). Institutions willing to pay closer attention to students with risk factors after enrollment will have a better chance of retaining them.

Several other factors have contributed to the gender gap, inhibiting degree attainment. Campbell and Mislevy (2013) investigated whether first-year student behaviors, attitudes, and expectations inform the chances of different enrollment patterns at a large, public, research-extensive university. In the study, enrollment patterns of women appeared to be more complicated than for men. Men were at higher risk of stopping out when their attitude toward the university became less optimistic. Women were at higher risk of stopping out when they lacked future direction, failed to earn the grades they wanted, had trouble staying motivated, felt inadequately prepared, and did not adjust to academic work.

Obtaining an advanced education is sought after to secure more significant earning potential. During the last three or more decades, women have outpaced men in enrollment and graduation at postsecondary institutions to better their future. In recent times, societal changes have propelled the gender gap to be less favorable to men. Creating an educational system for boys as successful as the current system for girls will require rethinking how we educate boys on academic success and teachers who understand male development and are trained and committed to providing it (Mortenson, 2008). Addressing these inequalities earlier in a student's postsecondary career may reduce gender imbalance and increase the likelihood of academic success at postsecondary institutions.

**High School Achievement**

High school grades and standardized test scores are the most steadfast predictors of academic success in college. These findings are in accord with various research studies on retention and attrition. Tucker and McKnight (2019) wrote:

The usage of precollege success indicators such as the American College Test (ACT), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and high school Grade Point Average (GPA) to identify

at-risk students at a public research university affirmed that the initial admissions assessment is a feasible predictor of academic success. (p. 168)

Their results confirmed that "ACT scores below 16 and HS GPA below 2.3 are reliable predictors of both low college GPA and SUCCESS" (Tucker & McKnight, 2019, p. 166). In this study, "the variable SUCCESS was defined as a student's ability to maintain good academic standing and continue making progress toward graduation or graduating from college" (Tucker & McKnight, 2019, p. 171). The semester of entry into college is an essential factor in determining retention. The findings revealed that "students who enter college in the fall semester are statistically more likely to be successful than the spring enrollees" (Tucker & McKnight, 2019, p. 172). The first semester of entry is a strong predictor of success. At-risk students experience adverse outcomes regardless of the semester to which they were admitted.

According to Stewart et al. (2015), students entering college with high academic scores from high school and students with a high first-semester college GPA were likely to persist through their sophomore year. Stewart et al. (2015) wrote, "The first-semester college cumulative GPA variable accounted for slightly over 24% of the model's variance and strongly correlated persistence" (p. 16). The findings indicated high school academic achievement harmed college persistence but was found not always to predict how a student persists beyond their first year. These results suggest high school academic performance may not predict persistence at the same institution beyond the first year.

In another research study on academic achievement success, Hoffman and Lowitzki (2005) explored the predictive strength of high school grades and standardized tests for racial and religious cohorts at a predominantly White institution. The relationship between pre-college characteristics seemed negative and weaker for minority and nonreligious students and positive

for White and religious students. For some students, standardized tests are strong predictors of success, but the groups were closely matched in this study. High school grades were a strong and statistically significant predictor of retention for students of color but not for non-Lutherans or majority cohorts. Traditional-age students are more likely to complete their degree than nontraditional students.

Chesters and Watson (2016) examined the association between pathways into university and subsequent retention and achievement for a cohort of nontraditional students attending a small international metropolitan university. Alternate pathways to college entry, such as on-campus bridge (preparatory) programs, give students a better chance of completing beyond their first semester by developing their academic skills. Based on the findings of this study, Chester and Watson (2016) stated that "40% of the students that entered through the alternative pathway with a GPA of 3 or less discontinued their studies compared to 18% of those with a GPA of 4; 14% of those with a GPA of 5 and 21% of those with a GPA of 6 or more" (p. 238). Such programs do not always guarantee students will attain high academic achievement but will reduce attrition.

High school grades and standardized testing are the strongest predictors of academic success in college. Preparing students for postsecondary education's rigors while in high school will increase their chances of success. Providing educational assistance helps underprepared students achieve their full potential and strengthens American higher education institutions' goals to maintain enrollments, increase financial viability, and meet excellence standards (Stewart et al., 2015). Because academic performance and standardized testing influence academic achievement in higher education, students need to resolve any barriers to ensure student success and reduce attrition behavior. The most used and strongest college academic

success predictors result from students' high school grades and standardized test scores. These predictors are crucial factors in determining if a student will remain in college, but learning how an individual's socioeconomic status contributes to attrition behavior is equally important.

**Socioeconomic Status**

According to Johnson (2008), an individual's socioeconomic status influences retention at postsecondary institutions; he found students with higher family incomes, submitting a FAFSA application, and coming from high schools within a 60-mile radius are more likely to enroll and persist to the second year. Students are less likely to persist if they come from schools with many recipients who receive free or reduced lunch. Giani (2015) provided a more holistic picture of how SES impacts various postsecondary process stages and defined socioeconomic resources as a composite of separate variables, including total family income, parents' educational attainment, and parents' occupational status. The application and enrollment stages presented more considerable disparities for students with lower ability levels. Giani (2015) stated, "Even for students with roughly equivalent levels of demonstrated ability, the impact of their socioeconomic background on the likelihood that they will successfully pass through a given transition appears to depend heavily on the selectivity of the institution with which they are interacting with" (p. 122). Giani (2015) wrote:

> A student with a higher SES and lower ability are more likely to apply for institutions with higher achieving students. Low-SES students have a higher probability of dropping out; therefore, targeted interventions are found to be a necessity. Failing to account for the interactive nature of students' socioeconomic backgrounds and academic ability may result in institutions employing strategies that are less effective at supporting student success. (p. 124)

Socioeconomic status (SES) is used and defined in various ways, including dimensions of income and wealth, educational level, and occupation/employment status (Karimshah et al., 2013). According to Karimshah et al. (2013), the research focused on identifying students' strategies to continue their studies when faced with adversity and stress. Regardless of SES level, half the students reported leaving due to financial, health, family, and relationship problems.

Stanfiel (1973) was concerned with the relationship of SES to students' SAT scores, rate of attrition over two years, and academic achievement during the first semester and after two years at a predominantly Black university:

> Socioeconomic status in this study was defined by parents' income and education; for
> blacks, the educational implication of SES is embedded in the context of social
> experience as a minority group subject to unusual stresses and often denied a fair share of
> society's resources. (p. 481)

Findings suggest the high attrition rate (40%) of low SES students indicates the significant challenges experienced by disadvantaged students who seek higher education. Simultaneously, economic and other factors related to persistence in college worked in favor of students from higher SES status. A major reason for attrition, regardless of SES level, for all noncontinuing students tended to be their low academic achievement.

**Financial Aid Options**

One essential goal of all college students is to reduce their future financial burden. Over the last decade, higher education institutions have witnessed a dramatic shift in college student funding from grants to loans and a widening educational attainment gap between students from affluent and poor families (Chen & DesJardins, 2008). The type of aid a student receives is determined by federal and state governments and the institution. The federal government offers

the most extensive need-based aid programs, requiring students to fill out an application to determine the amount of aid the student can receive. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) governs students' access to many forms of need-based aid, serving as a gateway to billions of dollars in federal grants and loans. In addition to federal funds, states and institutions also commonly require completion of the FAFSA for students to qualify for financial aid programs (Furquim et al., 2017).

Receiving financial aid, or the lack thereof, affects various groups directly or indirectly. For example, it could mean deciding to seek employment to cover expenses or worry about managing studying and personal priorities. Gross et al. (2013) investigated how different forms of aid affected various student populations' educational attainment, with a specific interest in Latinos/Latinas residing in Indiana. After their study, Gross et al. (2013) found, "Over two-thirds of the participants that did not graduate had stopped-out, with the greatest number of students stopped-out for the first time at the end of the first and fourth years of enrollment" (p. 398). Their results found that receipt of state grants affects departure behavior for Latinos/Latinas differently than that of their peers. The more funds they receive, the better their chance of obtaining a degree. For Black students, receiving state grants would improve their chances of not stopping out compared to their White peers. Black students are more likely than their peers to need all types of loan options but are less likely to persist to graduation.

An increased number of students rely heavily on grants and loans to complete college. Furquim et al. (2017) examined the loan behavior of specific groups of students, such as first-generation students, because "little is known about how they finance their education" (p. 69). Furquim et al. explored differences in borrowing behavior across students' generational status by modeling financial aid application decisions, followed by the decision to borrow, conditional on

borrowing, and how much to borrow. First-generation students were more likely to apply for financial aid, borrow, and take out larger loans than their peers. Even when first-generation students received grants, they did not reduce the money borrowed from their peers. Determining why student groups have different borrowing behaviors is critical to reducing dropout rates. Reducing the amount of money a student can borrow or improving financial literacy before enrollment is a possible strategy to encourage persistence.

**Institutional Characteristics and Responsibilities**

Due to institutional policies and practices, students are at significant risk of dropping out in their first year. Pike et al. (2011) suggested that "the weak and inconsistent relationships between educational expenditures and college outcomes are also the products of mediating effects of student engagement and contingent effects created by differences in the characteristics of institutions" (p. 83). Ryan (2004) sought to better understand student departure by investigating the impact of institutional expenditures on degree attainment. The allocation of institutional resources within higher education greatly affects attritional behavior. Ryan (2004) explained, "These resources, specifically where resources are used within an institution, affect the specific mixture and quality of professional and faculty staffing, expertise, programming, services, support, and opportunities for experimentation, innovation, and improvement that shape the institutional environments" (p. 100). Instructional and academic support positively affected graduation rates, while student services appeared to have the opposite outcome. Chen (2012) theorized how institutional characteristics such as demographics, structure, faculty resources, and financial resources contribute to conditions that reduce student dropout risks at various institutions. The results highlighted "the importance of using academic preparation and college experiences to predict dropout and implying that the cumulative dropout risk is about 56% within

the six-year observation period, fluctuating by year, the highest (17.7%) being in the first year"
(Chen, 2012, p. 495).

Institutions with strong peer climates could influence individuals to remain enrolled even
if the students initially intended to stop, drop out, or transfer. Titus (2004) demonstrated that the
average chance of persistence at a four-year institution is related to measures of institutional
structural-demographic characteristics and student peer climate but is unrelated to peer
characteristics and aggregate student experiences. Oseguera and Rhee (2009) evaluated
institutional retention climates to understand persistence behavior better. Oseguera and Rhee
(2009) stated, "Peer climates, as defined by a student body's aggregate report of stop out, drop
out, or transfer intentions, were found to independently determine whether a student would
persist or not, as did a campus' overall retention rate" (p. 564). Also, Oseguera and Rhee's
(2009) study results "produced little evidence that faculty perceived campus climates as defined
by emphasizing the teaching/learning function, multicultural environments, and active learning
to contribute to student persistence behavior" (p. 561). To provide better instruction and
increased student support, campus partners must collaborate to strengthen the institutional
climate and encourage persistence effectively.

In examining the effects of institutional climate for diversity on withdrawal outcomes, Yi
(2008) noticed the enhanced recruitment of minority students led to the possibility of higher
stop-out rates. Students withdraw for various reasons. Personal reasons were cited as the leading
cause of dropout, and institutional characteristics were attributed to why students stop out or
transfer. Yi's (2008) results indicated,

> Students attending colleges and universities placing a high priority on diversity had
>
> higher odds of stopping out (67%), after controlling for differences in the student-level

variables including student background characteristics, precollegiate measures, goal and

institutional commitment, academic and social integration, and financial aid. (p. 174)

The receipt of financial assistance reduced the chance that students would stop out, although

those students attending racially diverse institutions and those from more selective institutions

were more likely to stop out.

It will prove beneficial for institutions to address dropout rates and improve academic

performance. Recently, performance-based funding has been used to reward or punish

institutions based on retention and graduation rates. Dougherty et al. (2014) explained,

"Performance funding connects state appropriations directly to a college's performance on

outcomes such as student retention, graduation, transfer, and job placement" (p. 164).

Performance-based funding makes institutions accountable for their retention and graduation

rates. According to Dougherty et al. (2014), "the evidence suggests that performance funding

does stimulate colleges and universities to substantially change their policies and practices in a

quest for better student outcomes, it is unclear whether performance funding improves outcomes,

and can avoid major side effects" (p. 164). Addressing the barriers that deter student success can

help students entering colleges become better prepared for academic challenges and reduce the

speculation surrounding the stigma around the "decreased value" of a college degree. Institutions

need to address what have been identified as the leading indicators of gaps in common metrics

like retention, graduation, and career outcomes and often reflect institutional policies' influence

on students' sense of belonging (Education Advisory Board [EAB] Working Group, 2019).

These demographic disparities are related to precollege academic preparation, family expectation

and self-efficacy, climate, finance, pedagogy, and academic experience.

Not only should institutions identify the barriers to student success, but also students should recognize at-risk factors that can disrupt their future goals and aspirations. Horton (2015) identified a lack of college readiness as a significant barrier impacting success in college. Horton (2015) stated, "Lack of readiness for college places students at risk of failing courses and dropping out of college, temporarily or permanently, particularly during the 1st year of enrollment" (p. 83). Horton (2015) argued, "Many students who are returning to school after an extended period due to other responsibilities, such as family and jobs, do not have the academic skills to navigate the educational landscape effectively" (p. 83). A specific group of at-risk students who are least likely to successfully navigate the college environment and face multiple barriers to success is first-generation college students.

First-generation college students face too many barriers as opposed to their high-achieving peers. Guiding students to address their problems and limitations in practical ways requires educators to think and act differently in achieving their educational mission, to identify high-risk factors, delineate models to address them, and document effective strategies that challenge students in their thinking, reflection, performance assessment, and self-growth (Horton, 2015). Falcon (2015) attributed first-generation students' academic barriers to success to their unfamiliarity with the college curriculum's rigor and expectations, their parent's inability or unwillingness to help their child adequately prepare for college, to students' lack of self-esteem, and the limited interactions among their peers. Stebleton and Soria (2012) examined the perceived academic obstacles faced by first-generation students at large public research universities. First-generation students often encounter specific obstacles that compromise their academic success, such as higher instances of competing job responsibilities, family responsibilities, weak math skills, weak English skills, inadequate study skills, and feeling

stressed, upset, or depressed. Any effective strategy implemented to reduce obstacles experienced by first-generation students and other at-risk populations will require open communication. To assist first-generation students, Stebleton and Soria (2012) recommended "that universities ease the transition to college, encourage engagement on the college/university campus, and promote (re)entry for young and working adults" (p. 15).

**Underlying Student Influences**

Institutions have been slow to resolve challenges hindering students from obtaining a degree. Much of the discussion to reduce attrition, such as tracking students from disadvantaged backgrounds and supporting them through their first year of transition to higher education, frames the problem from the university's perspective rather than the student's perspective (Ajjawi et al., 2020). Discovering the decision to leave is rarely related to a single issue, "most students' reasons for leaving included circumstances that went beyond university control, such as seeking a type of education that their university did not provide or issues related to working while studying" (Hovdhaugen et al., 2013, p. 167). However, Hovdhaugen et al. (2013) stated that "universities aiming at lower student departure rates generally use blanket measures, lumping together all students, regardless of whether they are leaving to study at other institutions or dropping out altogether" (p. 172). Higher education institutions must support the undergraduate experience by pledging to address the barriers that impede student success. Longden (2006) indicated higher education institutions are at risk of spontaneous reactions rather than seeking to understand underlying influences, including employment, commitment, family support, lack of pre-college preparation, and academic and social engagement. Achieving a clearer understanding of why students prematurely depart begins with examining the role these influences play in helping them successfully navigate their educational experiences.

**Reinforcing Educational Experiences**

Many believe colleges and universities should do more to ensure individuals entering the campus environment receive the proper support needed to transition and navigate their educational experiences. Reinforcing educational experiences involves transitions affecting their desire to remain engaged in the campus environment. Palmer et al. (2010) investigated how students transition between one place (home) and another (university), which can result in an in-between-ness (betwixt space) to form a sense of belonging to university life. The initial experiences felt in these transitions between home and the university can produce barriers or turning points that hinder one from making meaningful connections. Palmer et al. (2010) highlighted, "The concept of a turning point(s) can further delineate the nature of when and how the transition occurs and how the social and material experiences span multiple spheres of the student's university life" (p. 50). Some turning-point experiences can invoke a change of direction, which produces anxiety and gives a sense of support and guidance. Maunder et al. (2013) investigated how students talked about and reflected on their transition experiences into the university. An essential finding of the study was that students held internal images that created specific attitudes and beliefs about the university they used to adjust to their new environment. The formation of social relationships was an essential part of this transition. It contributes to a positive transition experience as the students navigate their current and past cultural experiences to create their identities.

Literature about educational experiences mainly examined the transition of first-year students, some from special populations, into the university environment, focusing on the lack of timely information, meaningful engagement, social relationships, and low academic engagement (Baik et al., 2019; Maunder et al., 2013; Tobolowsky et al., 2019). Mayhew et al. (2016)

conducted a multifaceted analysis of previous research on how the undergraduate experience affects student populations. Their findings suggest technology improves critical thinking skills while diversity-focused coursework promotes identity formation, community engagement, self-esteem, and openness to diversity. In 2009, Harper examined race-conscious student engagement and indicated, "College students who are actively engaged inside and outside the classroom are considerably more likely than their disengaged peers to persist through baccalaureate degree attainment" (p. 40). Harper deemed "high impact" educational practices, such as research with faculty, study abroad, service learning, internship, and senior experience (see also Kuh, 2008), are necessary for active and learning sustained engagement despite racial minority undergraduates being less likely to enjoy the benefits them (p. 41).

Maton et al. (2011) examined the similarities and differences between African American, Latina/o, and Asian American students of color experiences and perspectives and those of European American psychology students. All students found greater satisfaction when they received support from their peers, academic advisors, faculty and staff, and institutional policies. African American students related cultural diversity as positively influencing their college experiences, "suggesting that special attention should be paid to ensuring the presence of faculty, staff, and students of color, and the availability of an array of diversity issue courses" (Maton et al., 2011, p. 73). European Americans were less likely to report a connection between the academic barriers they experienced and racial and ethnic status. All the students in the study found significant gratification when they were given mentoring opportunities.

**Mentoring Programs**

An institutional strategy that contributes to helping individuals, more specifically minority populations, feel connected and engaged in their postsecondary journey is the

establishment of mentoring programs. Mentoring programs allow students to see the faculty, staff, and administration care about their needs (Roscoe, 2015). Roscoe (2015) expressed, "Oftentimes when students decide to leave an institution because of negative experiences, he/she communicates their experiences with prospective students" (p. 54). These communication results give others a negative view of the institution. Mentoring programs such as the African American Male Mentoring Program (AAMMP) at Pennsylvania State University have successfully created a pathway for supporting the high school to college matriculation and retention of African American males by addressing the personal development, precollege socialization and readiness, leadership, career planning, and life survival needs (Mitchell & Stewart, 2012). Based on the study of first year and sophomore African American male students at Penn State Greater Allegheny, "the mentorship program helped them to matriculate and improve their overall academic performance once they reached college" (Mitchell & Stewart, 2012, p. 88). Mentoring programs can help students successfully transition into higher educational environments, but it is one of many strategies needed to reduce attrition behavior.

Mentoring usually takes place if the student is experiencing difficulties, while academic coaching is used as a development strategy. Deiorio et al. (2016) viewed academic coaching as "a developmental process whereby an individual learner meets regularly over time with a faculty coach to create goals, identify strategies to manage existing and potential challenges, improve academic performance, and develop professional identity toward reaching the learner's highest potential" (p. 2). Academic coaching is thought to take a more holistic approach than other types of support. Capstick et al. (2019) explored the effectiveness of academic coaching for academically at-risk college students and found it created an atmosphere of support and accountability. Study results indicated:

Full- and part-time students who participated in academic coaching had significant GPA

increases, were more than likely to earn at least a 2.00 GPA in the intervention semester

and were more likely to be retained at the university the following semester than were

those students who did not participate in the program. (p. 219)

Cornish (2016) researched a coaching program at Northwestern University in Chicago dedicated

to increasing the number of underrepresented minority students who pursue science education

careers. Study results concluded, "Career coaching can supplement traditional one-to-one

research mentoring, provide new role models for underrepresented minority students and be an

avenue to openly talk about race and gender" (Cornish, 2016, para. 4).

**Employment During Enrollment**

Much debate is centered on student employment and persistence as the cost of attending

college and student attrition rise. Student employment is defined as work full-time students

engage in outside of school. It examines how work intensity differentially affects the dropout

decision (Choi, 2018). In the study performed in 1975 on the theory of student involvement,

students working on campus is thought to influence retention positively (Astin, 1999). However,

students' time on campus increases their opportunity to engage with their peers, faculty, and

staff. On the contrary, the more hours spent working off campus affects the institution's ability to

retain the student. Astin (1999) reported, "Because they are spending considerable time and

energy on nonacademic activities that are usually unrelated to student life, full-time work off

campus decreased the time and energy that the student can devote to studies and other campus

activities" (p. 524). Regarding student employment, Pike et al. (2008) argued that spending a lot

of time working is a serious concern for educators and policymakers because working while

attending school reduces their effort and results in lower grades.

The importance of obtaining a degree means increased job opportunities after graduation, but the need for students from families with low socioeconomic status to work while in college is evident. Some researchers view student employment as injurious to academic success, while others find it advantageous. The familial background contributes to whether a student chooses to work during their college years. Students from less affluent backgrounds are often more likely to be employed while trying to obtain a college education. The role of encouragement and support to stay in college from friends and family in predicting the likelihood of persisting was substantiated for non-minorities but not minority students (Nora et al., 1996). Those likely to participate in work tend to have disadvantaged family backgrounds, poor prior academic achievement, unfavorable institutional characteristics, and often work to pay for their college expenses rather than for other reasons, such as accruing work experience (Choi, 2018). Dundes and Marx (2006) determined at what point the number of hours worked helps or hinders and found the most commonly indicated reasons for working were to earn spending money, followed by the need to pay basic living expenses and to pay tuition; fewer students were working to please parents and many fewer still worked to fill gaps in their schedules. Resounding evidence points to the fact that students may not receive adequate financial support from their families or enough grants or scholarships and refusing to take out federal loans results in them having to find employment.

The number of hours worked, and academic course load played a substantial role in this argument. Knowing how many hours a student can work on or off-campus is noteworthy before affecting their enrollment. The effects of working 20 hours or more on or off-campus determine the relationship between creating meaningful college experiences and attrition. According to Bozick (2007), "Students who work more than 20 hours a week and who live at home are more

likely to leave school during the first year than those who work 20 hours a week or less and who reside on campus" (p. 261). Working for pay full time, or nearly full time (i.e., more than 20 hours per week), clearly appears detrimental to first-year students' academic success (Pike et al., 2008). A student employment study by Elling and Elling (2000) indicated that students who work more hours are more likely to report that their employment frequently interferes with their academic progress. They found that students who worked 30 or more hours per week were less involved with campus activities than those who were not employed or were employees for fewer than 30 hours. The more hours students worked resulted in increased interference with academic performance, campus involvement, and opportunities to build relationships with their peers.

**Importance of Family Support**

When students decide to attend college, their family's role in their transition will be crucial to success. Friends and family's familiarity and stability are grounding elements that offer support networks of infinite importance in the hectic, changing, and challenging world of the first-year undergraduate student (Kantanis, 2002). Roksa and Kinsley (2019) examined how two different forms of family support—emotional and financial—are related to academic outcomes (grades, credit accumulation, and persistence) among low-income college students. They found all students benefit from emotional support regardless of income level, but,

> When students reported receiving more emotional support from their families, they were more likely to have a GPA of 3.0 or higher, more likely to accumulate at least 24 credits, and more likely to persist through the second year of college. (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019, p. 425)

The perceived parental involvement and support have specific roles in predicting student self-processes and achievement, highlighting the importance of sustaining parents' contribution to

college students (Ratelle et al., 2005). The type of support received may prompt different outcomes. Strom and Savage (2014) revealed that initial support from family and friends positively impacted their initial commitment to the goal of graduation. Subsequent support from family and friends appeared to have a different impact due to the various messages influencing students' goal commitment. The students begin to receive messages from various outlets that make their decisions about college tougher. When considering the notion of emerging adulthood, "it may be that subsequent family support impacted the subsequent goal to graduate because students may have more exposure to parental support (e.g., advice) over longer periods when compared to exposure from the friends they had prior to college" (Strom & Savage, 2014, p. 543). Family members are more likely to influence where a student goes to college, and friends are more likely to influence persistence behaviors.

Support will look different not only by family and friend dynamics but also by gender. "The dynamics and consequences of family disruption are different for male and female students, and social class interacts with gender to produce different outcomes" (Baxter & Britton, 2001, p. 91). Women are more likely to earn a GPA of 3.0 or higher than men, but the two groups had similar odds of accumulating at least 24 credits and persisting through the second year of college (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). According to Gill et al. (2015), "Becoming a student not only challenges traditional gender roles and identity within the family, to be in education potentially challenges traditional male working-class identity, threatening both an individual's self and demanding renegotiation of their relationships with others" (p. 2). Cheng et al. (2012) sought to clarify how distinct aspects of perceived family support (social and economic) and gender affect college students' academic performance across three semesters. The results indicated male students' family social support positively predicted their GPA intercepts when their family

provided high and medium economic support, whereas female students' family social support positively predicted GPA intercepts when their family provided medium and low economic support. Having the appropriate social support allows the student to adjust properly to their academic environment's demands, while having inadequate economic or financial support is likely to cause unnecessary distractions.

The support students receive often determines how they will transition into higher education and predicts if they will remain enrolled. Bozick and DeLuca (2011) examined why young adults do not transition to college, using a nationally representative sample of college non-enrollees, and found multiple reasons drive this, such as academic preparation and the level of support determined by their parent's level of education. Sosu and Pheunpha (2019) addressed the current literature gap by examining how the cumulative effect of academic vulnerability and family support influences the trajectory of dropout. Family support is significant because the transition to college is constantly changing and requires continuous adjustments. Sosu and Pheunpha (2019) suggested, "Contextual factors such as the support mechanisms that enable individuals to experience lower levels of emotional distress and become fully integrated into the institution constitute another important determinant of university dropout" (p. 2). Students who fail to integrate socially into the campus environment often rely on their families to fill in the gap of homesickness or loneliness.

**How Commitment, Involvement, and Mental Health Affect Departure**

Commitment levels subsequently influence whether an individual student will graduate or depart from the institution. Institutional commitment also explains most—and sometimes all—of the relationship between social involvement and retention/persistence and the link between social integration and retention/ persistence (Mayhew et al., 2016). An important and consistent finding

in Mayhew et al. (2016) suggested that "the quality of involvement or engagement (whether academic or social) matters far more than the quantity" (p. 415). Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) used Tinto's (1975) model of student persistence and withdrawal behavior to examine a sample of residential freshmen disaggregated by sex to find substantial differences regarding integration levels. The authors found that a positive balance between the student and the campus environment must be present at the center of Tinto's behavior model to achieve persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) suggested, "What happens to a student after arrival on campus may have a greater impact on persistence than either the background characteristics or personal commitment to the institution and the goal of graduation brought to college" (p. 219). A notable difference between the study and Tinto's model is related to the direct/indirect effects of integration, goals, and institutional commitments.

## Commitment Levels by Gender and Racial or Ethnic Differences

Rubin (2012) indicated male students are often less integrated than female students; working-class students are less integrated than middle-class students regardless of whether they are in their first year of study and irrespective of whether they are men or women. Social integration for women had a stronger effect on persistence than academic integration but was the opposite for men—the indirect effects of social integration on male persistence related more with institutional commitment. Jones (2010) analyzed whether the impact of social integration on subsequent institutional commitment is conditional on gender. Social integration levels affected males and females differently but appeared to be of greater importance for females. Jones (2010) concluded, "The magnitude of the impact of social integration on subsequent institutional commitment is over six and a half times larger for female students than male students, indicating social integration does have a greater impact on female students" (p. 695). Compared to male

students, females with lower levels of social integration formed closer relationships with individuals, which will cause problems with their institutional commitment as opposed to those with higher social integration levels, which less affect their institutional commitment.

Expanding research on attrition behavior beyond gender, Fischer (2007) explored racial and ethnic differences in adjusting to college, the consequences different adjustment strategies have on college outcomes, and the college transition process's importance, including the various connections (formal and informal) to others on campus. Fischer expressed that all students in the study (Black, Hispanic, Asian, and White) could reduce their probability of leaving college by acquiring on-campus connections with friends and involvement in extracurricular activities. The chances of minority students leaving school decrease as they become more involved in extracurricular activities (Fischer, 2007, p. 148). Conversely, for Black and White students, off-campus connections increase the likelihood they will leave. It was concluded that students who fail to form sufficient informal (for all groups) and formal (for all groups except Whites) social connections to others on campus, regardless of race/ethnicity, are significantly more likely to leave more connected or involved students.

### Commitment, Involvement, and External Experiences

To further understand how the lack of involvement contributes to students' departure from college, Milem and Berger (1997) conducted a longitudinal analysis of student persistence to distinguish the relationship between perceptions, behaviors, and perceptual ideas. They believed that involvement in campus activities could influence first-year students' perceptions about how much the institution supports aspects of their social and academic experiences. Milem and Berger (1997) theorized that social integration might have a more influential role in predicting student persistence than academic integration (p. 398) but later concluded it ultimately

relates to commitment. The commitment to graduate is stronger for some students, even though the level of commitment varies at different points in the cycle of involvement behaviors. Berger and Milem (1999) reported, "Early involvement in the fall semester positively predicts spring involvement and has significant indirect effects on social integration, academic integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and persistence" (p. 658). In the fall semester, first-year students were likely to persist if they had higher academic achievement levels and were more involved in organized campus activities. First-year students likely to persist during the spring semester had higher involvement with faculty, peers, and traditional social activities.

Christie and Dinham (1991) provided insight into student perceptions of college experiences at a community college that influenced their social integration using Tinto's college student departure model. Participants indicated the "influence of external experiences depended on whether time and energy devoted to external experiences interfered with the time and energy needed to spend time on campus and to participate in extracurricular activities" (Christie & Dinham, 1991, p. 429). Their longitudinal investigation discovered several types of external experiences related to integration into the college's social system, with the most significant experiences relating to family and high-school friends. Inconsistent with Tinto's model, Christie and Dinham's (1991) results "demonstrated the salience of external forces in students' daily lives, suggesting external experiences be placed alongside institutional experiences in the analysis of freshman social integration and, hence, in attempts to explain persistence" (p. 433). Insight into how students integrate into the campus environment is as important as why they leave.

Academic and social integration are the most critical factors in predicting successful incorporation with the institution and persistence from the first year to the second (Cabrera et al.,

1993). The responsibility to ensure that students persist in obtaining a degree falls upon the entire campus community and begins with ensuring that students have integrated appropriately. The degree to which a student develops ties or becomes integrated into a specific institution or the higher education experience may also impact attrition (Stratton et al., 2007). Positive social integration for a student is essential to setting the foundation for positive persistence. Braxton et al. (2000) postulated both student entry traits and initial levels of commitment affect the degree to which an individual becomes integrated into the institution's academic and social communities. Researchers have found that this commitment level varies by gender, race, ethnicity, class, or socioeconomic status. It is instrumental in determining the students' ability to progress each semester or year. These characteristics have been identified and associated with student persistence, but additional factors become apparent as students' competition increases. O'Keeffe (2013) believed that students' mental health leads to attrition. Universities' inability to support students' emotional and mental health needs may harm enrollment. Investing resources and creating effective strategies will play a role in ensuring students are treated appropriately to reduce their risk of attrition.

**Mental Health and Attrition**

Mental health conditions include depression, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and substance abuse. Nami et al. (2014) analyzed the current status of psychological problems, explored the measures taken to promote university students, and "showed 37.37% of the participants are suspected of having mental disorders" (p. 840). Stress often precipitated the onset of any psychiatric episodes, leading to a reduction in a student's ability to remain connected to the campus environment. Arria et al. (2013) examined the

interrelationship between substance use and psychiatric conditions among college students as they relate to the risk of discontinuing college enrollment.

Arria et al. (2013) defined discontinuous enrollment as "a gap in enrollment of one or more semesters during the first two years (early discontinuity) or the second two years (late discontinuity) versus continuous enrollment throughout all four years" (p. 165). Depression was found to be the most pervasive condition that caused enrollment interruption. Consequently, already at risk of withdrawal, "first-year students with high levels of depressive symptoms were at increased risk of missing one or more semesters during their first two years of college" (Arria et al., 2013, p. 169). College counseling centers are becoming increasingly important to help students cope with their psychological issues.

Higher education counseling centers were formed in the late 1940s to help veterans assimilate back into civilian life, but their services have expanded to serve all students seeking a college education since then. Important functions of college counseling centers include addressing the psychological problems students are experiencing and supporting the institution's mission. Prince (2015) noted the current standards focus on the following four essential functions of counseling services to ensure counseling services offer a breadth of services to students and the campus: individual and group student counseling, prevention, and outreach; consultation to faculty and staff; and contributions to campus safety. Effective college counseling entails not only ensuring the well-being of students so they can remain in school but also assisting some students with emotional problems to leave school (Sharkin, 2004). Implementing effective strategies to respond to students with depression, anxiety, and other mental illness issues will enhance campus safety and improve the student's chances of being retained.

Strategies for responding to the surge in mental health needs on college campuses include administrators providing the funding necessary to bring awareness to this issue. One issue is to increase the number of staff members who can handle student crises; a second is to seek better collaboration between campus constituents; and a third is to ensure adequate marketing to students, faculty, and staff about services for mental health needs. Prince (2015) acknowledged that the common practices of campuses are threat management and student-of-concern committees. Threat management committees assess campus safety when student behavior has risen to a level of concern for campus safety. Student-of-concern committees often meet to facilitate communication, coordination, and timely contacting students at risk to ensure they are connected to the proper resources. Sharkin (2004) believed counseling centers would be more effective if they coordinated with academic departments or other offices to reach out to students who are particularly at risk for attrition, such as those placed on academic warning or probation. The role of the college counseling center has evolved over the last several decades. More students are transitioning into higher education, requiring mental illness services provided by counseling centers to help them learn and flourish academically. With the proper funding, staffing, and marketing assistance, counseling centers can act as key players in fighting mental illness on college campuses and reducing attrition.

## From the Perspective of Student Attrition

The first year of college, particularly the first six months, is critical in determining student persistence. Early retention data were only analyzed during one period (upon college entry to the second year) and used to explain the departure process. Tinto (1998) showed the folly of this notion and outlined a framework that argues the longitudinal process of student

persistence, and by extension, the process of student departure is made up of distinct stages through which new students must typically pass during their college careers.

Tinto (1998) referred to the work of Van Gennep (1961), who used three stages (or rites of passage), including separation, transition, and incorporation, to explain:

> Each stage served to move individuals from youthful participation to full membership in adult society using ceremony and ritual. The departure process is seen as being differently shaped over time by the varying problems new students encounter in attempting to navigate the stages of separation and transition successfully in order to become incorporated into the life of the college. (p. 440)

The stages involve how people move from one place or situation to another. It should be noted that students experience departure at every stage of their college career, but it is most critical in the first year to implement programs and strategies early to encourage successful transitions and degree completion. According to Yorke (1999), "Retention studies are conducted for the purposes of evaluation, policy formation, and planning by offices of institutional research and often fail to address the issue of non-completion from a synoptic perspective" (p. 3). In commenting on a study examining why full-time students leave college early, Yorke (1999) continued:

> The influences on withdrawals [*are*] comprised of 6 principal factors: poor quality of the student experience; inability to cope with the demands of the program; unhappiness with the social environment; wrong choice of the program; matters related to financial need; dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision (location, technology resources, social facilities). (p. 41)

However, Herzog's (2005) study measured freshmen academic challenges and enrollment patterns that affect persistence from first to second year using multi-year cohorts at public institutions. Herzog (2005) found:

> The propensity for the better prepared [student] to drop out prior to the second-year doubles after they re-enroll in the spring. The spring re-enrolled are also more likely to transfer, with the better prepared facing almost twice the odds to do so compared to less prepared students. Once re-enrolled in the spring, even average prepared students, those in the middle third, have second-year dropout and transfer adds that are 50–70% greater compared to the less prepared. (p. 905)

As the likelihood of withdrawal increases from year to year, an observed strategy among individuals in the study was the simultaneous enrollment at multiple institutions, which afforded opportunities to create a better work/life balance. In examining alternate higher education strategies, Bell (2014) asked, "What if moving from one higher education option to another actually improves the odds of persisting to graduation—and offers a less costly approach to getting there?" (p. 2). A new phenomenon to resolving withdrawal issues may be to shift away from the traditional retention models. Bell (2014) continued:

> What may be now emerging is a new higher education path in which funding and accrediting agencies care less about single-institution retention and become more accepting of multi-institution experiences as long as students graduate within a reasonable amount of time with minimum debt. (p. 2)

It may be important to increase retention strategies by correctly identifying individuals at risk of withdrawal and creating programs that increase their chances of success. When students fail to persist at higher education institutions, their academic and social environments are

affected (Burke, 2019). Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) analyzed attrition studies to provide a better understanding of the attrition process and explain how institutions can find good ways attrition can be reduced; there is "no statistical difference between voluntary leavers and stayers but . . . background traits could be influential in their interaction with students' enrollment experiences" (p. 273). The findings suggest efforts to reduce current attrition levels are more likely to succeed if they are focused on what happens to students after their arrival on campus, rather than who students are at the time of admission. Successful persistence will occur when students are engaged in an institution's academic and social environments.

Students are entering college with many more challenges, which include family stress, work obligations, availability of adequate resources, and lack of time management skills. In general, the development of these stressors could have further negative effects on students, such as poor mental and physical health, and adversely affect learning ability and achievement (Stoliker & LaFreniere, 2015). Terenzini and Pascarella (1978) assessed the influence of attrition on "students' precollege characteristics, their experiences and perception of the freshmen year, and interactions related to sex, major, and racial or ethnic origin" (p. 347), and they concluded that academic integration is more important than social integration and that certain precollege characteristics and experiences before the first year may be more important. Examining the factors that affect retention and contribute to students dropping out after their first year of enrollment can give insight into how college administrators positively contribute to student success.

College student persistence is of interest and concern to the student affairs professional, as the development and implementation of policies and programs designed to reduce student

attrition are frequently the responsibility of the student affairs professional staff (Braxton, 1988).

Jobe and Lenio (2014) expressed:

> Most researchers of higher education recognize student attrition as a metric to focus on
> and improve, but some educators downplay the negative consequences to students who
> fail to persist, arguing the net gain of acquisition of knowledge experience with higher
> education and personal growth. (p. 11)

In addition, Jobe and Lenio (2014) pointed out that "Despite general differences in students' demographics, market share, and business models (that appear to be eroding over time), student characteristics still supersede any institutional differences in terms of impact on retention" (p. 15). The most prevalent factors identified in attrition behavior literature that affect retention as described in attrition behavior literature are related to student motivation, sense of belonging on campus, and the effects of students' pre-college characteristics.

### Student Motivation to Persist

Academic motivation may affect students' learning outcomes. Learning outcomes differ based on their measurement and/or targeted population and rendered "motivation as a feeling of satisfaction/success when being engaged in worthwhile learning" (Gedera et al., 2015, p. 14). Motivation is presented in two forms: intrinsic (from within) and extrinsic (associated with external factors). Either way, student motivation and engagement are closely related elements of student learning that impact learning outcomes. Suhre et al. (2013) mentioned, "Exploring the extent to which student differences progress at the undergraduate phase can be traced back to differences in student motivation, correlate to degree program characteristics that might support student exam performance and study progress" (p. 479). The analysis of student motivation and

ability originated from the principles of goal motivation and cognitive evaluation theories, which explained the differences between participation, performance, and engagement.

Motivational factors that played a role in the study and affected the students' desire to succeed in college were based on a fear of not achieving their goals and a lack of engagement and intrinsic motivation. Ashraf et al. (2018) explored several reasons why students graduate on time, why some students graduate in a shorter time frame, and why some do not graduate at all by observing three traits that affect motivation and perseverance to complete their degree:

> These traits include early declaration of a major, which reflects motivation to find a suitable major, willingness to adjust preferences by changing major if facing difficulty in an already declared major, and continuing effort to improve performance after switching, which indicates persistence and motivation to graduate. (p. 88)

The results suggest that declaring a major early signifies commitment and willingness to address any obstacles favorably to increase graduation possibility, but not choosing a major or constantly switching majors has an unfavorable outcome.

Robbins et al. (2006) observed that motivational factors such as academic discipline (effort put into completing assigned coursework) are associated with a student's grade point average, retention, success in specific courses, and overall commitment to completing college. Grade point average was the strongest predictor of achievement motivation, while self-worth was considered an important motivation construct in determining college academic outcomes. Indirectly, Robbins et al. found academic self-efficacy to be the best predictor for both college outcomes in their analyses. Academic self-efficacy, which denotes confidence in performing academic tasks, should be relevant for understanding individual academic mindsets because it leads to specific behaviors that can encourage or discourage academic performance and

attainment (Han et al., 2017). To better promote timely degree attainment, students are more likely to succeed when their interests align with their academic environment. Allen and Robbins (2010) hypothesized that interest–major congruence affects persistence through two mechanisms: college major persistence and enthusiasm for coursework. Students are less likely to change their major when they are highly interested in what they are studying and more likely to drop out when low interest–major congruence is present. Ironically, motivation did not significantly affect timely degree attainment in the study.

## Commitment to Academic Goals

A student is responsible for committing to their envisioned goal before entering the institution. An individual's goal commitment is difficult to quantify because it may be partly related to factors affecting an individual's drive and motivation and the student's subjective valuation of the worth of education, which is difficult to measure (Wetzel et al., 1999). "Goal commitment is probably related to a person's total environmental background, including parental values on education, sibling order, peer-group pressures, and other factors that may influence the individual's drive and motivation" (Wetzel et al., 1999, p. 48). Locke and Latham (2002) believed goals affected one's performance by directing attention and efforts toward relevant activities and away from irrelevant activities, serving as energizing functions, and having the ability to affect task-relevant knowledge to develop planning strategies indirectly. The authors found factors for facilitating goal commitment were attributed to the importance of the expected outcomes and the belief that the goal is attainable. The attractiveness of goal attainment is affected by personal factors, varies across individuals, and stems from within instead of situational factors that deal with needs, beliefs, attitudes, and personality traits (Hollenbeck &

Klein, 1987). Students are often unsure or unrealistic about their expectations when transitioning from high school to college.

These indistinguishable expectations often lead to early attrition in students' academic careers. Rausch and Hamilton (2006) conducted a study to investigate the early withdrawal of traditional university freshmen before the end of their first year. The results suggested participants' departure revolved around the absence of clear educational goals and a preoccupation with personal and institutional factors. This study's key reasons for student withdrawal were early adverse experiences, frustrations, or alienation. A student's experience during their initial weeks and months at college directly influences whether they withdraw from college. Rausch and Hamilton concluded that early negative experiences, frustrations, or alienation seemed to be key reasons for withdrawal. Simple steps like ensuring communication is more effective with incoming students, assisting with scheduling, and pairing incoming students with mentor faculty and students might help make the university less impersonal and make a difference in attrition. Administrators can also map academic support plans in conjunction with other academic support services even before students arrive on campus (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2003). Examining the ways students' backgrounds influence this commitment is imperative.

Academic success is frequently correlated with a student's desire to be successful and a willingness to persevere through challenges. Students must adjust their behavior to move effectively from commitment to achieving their ultimate goal (Pizzolato, 2006). According to Strauss and Volkwein (2004), student commitment is defined as a student's overall satisfaction, sense of belonging, a positive impression of educational quality, and willingness to attend the institution again. In their study, which compared the dynamics of student commitment as an institutional outcome and predictor of student persistence at two and four-year institutions, they

found, "The strongest influence on institutional commitment was not from organizational characteristics, but from student-level variables, and not from student-entry characteristics, but from subsequent campus experiences" (Strauss & Volkwien, 2004, p. 220). Goal commitment is the desire of a student to obtain a college degree. Ishitani and DesJardins (2002) expressed, "Goal commitment is further shaped by the quality of interactions between students and the academic elements of the institution (i.e., interaction with faculty or participating in a study group)" (p. 4). Other interactions include receiving adequate support from family, friends, peers, and campus constituents. How do they measure their desire to complete college? Was their interest self-motivated or influenced by others? Does the student have the required support needed to finish college? These are questions that administrators must ask themselves when addressing student attrition.

## Adaptability Brings Student Success Together

University students' ability to adapt to their learning environment predicts degree completion by means of behavior engagement; how students enter the university and their ability to navigate successfully throughout this time is apt to influence their academic outcomes (Holliman et al., 2018). Behavioral engagement draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out (Fredricks et al., 2004).

> Findings showed beyond the effects of age, gender, and prior achievement, adaptability yielded significant direct effects on both positive and negative behavioral engagement (but not university degree completion) and significant indirect effects on university degree completion through the negative (but not positive) behavioral engagement. (Holliman et al., 2018, p. 797)

Students' ability to manage their transition into university life in the first year will significantly impact their ability to adapt to their new academic environment. Martin et al. (2012) developed a tripartite model of adaptability and declared, "Adaptability is about dealing with change and uncertainty and the like" (p. 61). However,

> Adaptable students are more likely engaged in their learning because being able to adjust to effectively manage change, novelty, and uncertainty helps students to keep up with lesson pacing and content and means students are less likely to experience low self-efficacy and poor performance. (Martin et al., 2012, p. 58)

Collie et al. (2017) examined adaptability among university students by testing Martin et al.'s tripartite model of adaptability to see whether it positively predicts students' engagement and achievement. They found students' adaptability was significantly associated with greater positive behavior, such as planning, while task management and lower negative engagement behavior were associated with academic achievement (GPA).

**Sense of Belonging**

A student's capacity to develop a sense of belonging within the higher education institution is a critical factor in determining student retention, particularly for those at risk of non-completion (O'Keeffe, 2013). A decision to withdraw from or persist in a college or university is affected by an individual's ability to integrate successfully into the campus environment. A sense of belonging is generally defined as a feeling of ease, safety, connection, and respect (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It embodies a strong sense of community. Students with a strong sense of community experience meaningful connectedness with others in ways that matter, such as making a difference for others, contributing to and being cared for by the community, and feeling that the community meets their needs (Mendoza et al., 2016). It is

crucial that first-year students feel this connectedness upon arrival into the university environment. Walton and Cohen (2011) pointed out, "Students who feel confident in their belonging may experience the social world in a way that reinforces this feeling. They may initiate more relationships and thus obtain more opportunities for belonging and growth" (p. 1450). Developing a sense of belonging involves motivation and commitment, which are important in encouraging persistence. Students continuously evaluate their commitment to stay enrolled based on their expectations, fostered through academic and social integration (Mendoza et al., 2016). Early orientation is crucial to help them feel as if they belong and are supported by the collegiate environment. This includes the student's ability to form meaningful relationships with faculty members.

"Students who place greater levels of focus or effort are more likely to perceive a sense of belonging with faculty members" (Newman et al., 2015, p. 570). Han et al. (2017) considered student experiences during the first year in college to have a more powerful influence on retention than the characteristics they bring to the institution: "Students who feel unconnected should find it harder to become constructively involved in academic activities and should more easily become bored, worried, and frustrated" (p. 1122). Van Herpen et al. (2020) showed that "To promote a sense of belonging and thus academic performance, it seems important therefore to encourage first-year students to be aware of their personal perception of the academic context (which is fueled with, filtered by, personal history" (p. 864). This encouragement will help to build resiliency and encourage growth mindset behavior. Students' development of a sense of belonging during their transition into the university environment depends on their ability to feel connected, supported, and motivated by campus partners. Failure to achieve these characteristics will undeniably lead to departure.

**Academic Integration**

Students entering college must be able to integrate themselves holistically into the student experience successfully. Early positive academic integration or engagement ensures students' progress beyond their first year. As a heavily cited researcher, Tinto (1975) developed a dropout model that consisted of longitudinal processes that examined the interactions between students and the institution's academic and social practices that lead students to persistence or withdrawal. Tinto (1975) described academic integration as meeting the explicit standards of the academic system, such as "grade performance, intellectual development, and social integration as the interaction between an individual and the college that result in social communication with peers, faculty, and staff" (p. 104). Tinto argued that an individual's continuance in college depends on their commitment, unique characteristics, ability to integrate academically and socially, and the institution's attributes. Students must attend classes during the academic integration process to meet regularly with their academic advisors to discuss their degree plans, with faculty inside and outside of the classroom to discuss academic and non-academic matters, and with other students to acclimate themselves to campus resources and each other. Tinto also pointed out that students' academic integration into an institution is measured by their intellectual development and grade performance. Tinto (1975) theorized, "Intellectual development is an evaluation of the student's attributes and achievements concerning the system's values and objectives, while grade performance is a reflection of the person's ability and the institution's preferences for particular styles of academic behavior" (p. 104). The greater the level of commitment, the ability to integrate successfully into higher education's academic and social structures is known to affect persistence positively.

Kuh et al. (2008) sought to distinguish between key student behaviors through an institutional practice that fosters student success, emphasizing engagement using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE surveys undergraduates at 4-year institutions annually about their participation in the programs and activities that contribute to their academic and personal development, and it provides actionable data to improve the student experience (Kuh, 2009a). It was determined that student engagement in educationally purposeful activities in the first and second year of college is positively related to academic outcomes. Educationally purposeful activities mean faculty members must be more intentional about teaching institutional values and traditions and informing students about campus events, procedures, and deadlines such as registration (Kuh, 2009b). They must design cooperative learning activities to encourage after-class collaborations as a meaningful experience. As a student progresses from first year through senior status, the interaction between the student and faculty is more infrequent.

Students' most common type of contact with faculty was students requesting to meet after a class, and the least kind of contact was working with faculty on research projects. Most students desire only to have formal in-class interactions with faculty members. Pascarella (1980) thought for some students, frequent informal non-classroom contact with faculty might be most influential in their initial socialization to college (early in the freshman year), while for other students, the influence of casual conversations with faculty will have an optimal impact only if certain intellectual or personal development levels have been achieved. The informal non-classroom contact with faculty at the beginning of a student's college career may significantly impact their gratification of subsequent interactions with faculty. As it appears, not all types of non-classroom student–faculty interactions have the same influence on educational outcomes.

Pascarella (1980) suggested the greatest impact is focused on intellectual or artistic interests, values issues, or future career options, with the most effective form of non-classroom contact being faculty who were able to extend the intellectual content of the formal academic program into the student's non-classroom life. Cole (2010) used data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire to investigate the effects of student–faculty interactions on college academic achievement measured by the grade point average (GPA) of minority students. This study used college experience variables to assess minority students' in-class and non-classroom interactions with faculty. Further, Cole suggested, "Minority students' perceptions and experiences in class are likely to affect non-classroom student–faculty interactions, which is likely to influence students' academic achievement" (p. 140). Students indicated course-related contact, such as informal visits after class or discussions about term papers with faculty, positively related to their grade point average. These experiences were significantly positive for African Americans but were deemed negative for Asian American students. The experiences that negatively impacted minority students' grade point averages were related to when they sought advice on their writing or received criticism on their papers. However, if minority students established a mentoring relationship with faculty, it positively affected their grade point average but was only significant for Asian American students. Cole expressed that when students seeking advice or receiving criticism from faculty becomes a deterrent to students' academic achievement, interventions should be sought on both sides of the student–faculty relationship to mitigate the situation. When students arrived at the institution, it was suggested that faculty promote knowledge attainment and skill development by answering questions and teaching them how to answer and ask the appropriate questions.

In researching the academic performance and engagement of ethnic minority students at a leading university in China, Mei et al. (2016) concluded that student–faculty interaction may have little direct influence on student achievement but may directly connect with campus integration. Ethnic minorities were less likely than their peers to have discussions with or seek feedback on a faculty member's assignments. These less frequent interactions explained the lower academic achievement of minority students. The faculty's role is essential to helping students become academically and socially integrated into the campus environment. Positive student–faculty interactions with minority students may be key to supporting minority students' academic success and reducing attrition behavior.

**Social Integration**

The informal or semi-formal integration level into the colleges' social system can dictate if a student will remain at the institution. Studying with peers, family support, gender (male), participation in a club or sport, math preparation, and working fewer than 15 hours were all positive predictors of social integration (D'Amico et al., 2014). According to Tinto (1975), social integration is seen as the interaction between the individual with given sets of characteristics (background, values, commitments) and other persons of varying characteristics within the college; social integration, like academic integration, involves notions of both levels of integration and degrees of congruency between the individual and their social environment. The social integration process encourages a sense of connectedness and belonging to the institution, which involves participating in student organizations, joining faculty-facilitated research endeavors, and being assigned service–learning projects.

Insufficient social interaction seems to lead primarily to voluntary withdrawal. In contrast, in some cases, excessive social interaction may lead to dropout if the group with whom

one associates is disinclined toward academic achievement or if the intensity of interaction detracts from time spent on academic studies (Tinto, 1975). Social integration was found to have a direct link to goal and institutional commitment. One theory of student involvement is based on a student development model created by Astin (1999), which examines the amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes to the academic experience. This model underscores students' role in their active contribution to the learning process and the extent to which they can achieve their goals. It highlights the importance of what an individual does rather than how they think or feel. Astin identified factors that dramatically influence persistence in higher education. Uninvolved students were said to spend less time participating in activities on or off campus, while highly involved students spent more time engaged in campus activities.

**Pre-College Characteristics**

Precollege characteristics have been studied extensively to determine how they affect retention. Prior academic achievement and intellectual ability are primary factors affecting student retention and learning success (Zamani, 2000). Understanding students' academic aptitude before entry into college will predict how well they transition from high school to college. Terenzini and Pascarella (1978) conceived a variety of precollege traits (including sex, academic aptitude, personality dispositions, high-school achievement, and other indicators identified in the literature as being associated with dropping out) explained less than 4% of the total variation in attrition status, which was not statistically significant. Understanding students' academic aptitude before entry into college will predict how well they transition from high school to college. Allen et al. (2008) reported that pre-college educational development, pre-college academic performance, and academic self-discipline positively affect first-year academic performance. Ishitani (2006) rationalized that the greatest benefits of explaining first-generation

students' college success result from thoroughly examining students' precollege attributes and the quality of their interactions with higher education institutions. These attributes included the ones already mentioned and socioeconomic status. Contrasting literature from Stewart et al. (2015) suggested high academic performance in high school may not predict persistence at the same institution beyond the first year. Achieving one aspect of integration without the other will produce an atomistic student, which increases the likelihood of attrition beyond the first year.

Students bring various characteristics from high school to college that influence how well they will integrate into the campus environment and succeed academically. Crisp et al. (2009) examined the impact of the student's interest and decision to obtain a degree in STEM fields at a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) using demographic, precollege, environmental, and college factors. Students' interest in attending this institution was based on their secondary educational experiences related to college preparation, test scores, and prior mathematics and science achievement. Crisp et al. (2009) mentioned, "The persistence of undergraduates in STEM majors has been found to be associated with grade point average, academic aptitude tests, and mathematics" (p. 928). Heaney and Fisher (2011) attempted to identify and understand dominant influences on student persistence for students most at risk of departure at a public land grant university. Heaney and Fisher (2011) highlighted, "Conditionally admitted students are considered *at-risk* because of long-term institutional data showing higher academic failure and departure rates for students entering with low GPA and/or ACT scores" (p. 64). Precollege characteristics that affected conditionally admitted students in this study included motivation and college preparatory curriculum, among other factors such as social and academic integration.

For several reasons, conditionally admitted students are more likely to depart from postsecondary institutions. According to Heaney and Fisher (2011), "Conditional-admitted

students are likely to depart if they had enrolled without any education or career goals or felt pressured by their parents to attend college" (p. 64). Individuals who had not taken advanced placement or dual credit courses were less likely to persist. "Students who reported taking no advanced placement courses had a 30% chance of persisting, while those who said having taken any college prep course were likely to return at a rate of 68%" (Heaney & Fisher, 2011, p. 68). To encourage persistence within at-risk student populations, administrators must explore strategies to help them adapt and transition into the institution's academic and social environments.

In an attempt to discover how decisions and academic performance affect time to graduation beyond students' demographic and college-preparation characteristics, Yue and Fu's (2017) findings revealed that the most important factor was academic performance, followed by choosing a major. The authors considered pre-college characteristics to be time-independent variables while time-dependent variables, such as enrollment intensity, change from term to term. Yue and Fu (2017) revealed, "Stop-outs accounted for a large proportion of the elapsed time from entry to completion for students who took more than six years to earn their degree" (p. 185). Research has shown that student demographic background is associated with time to degree. Yue and Fu (2017) explained, "Male students, minority students, Pell grant eligible students are less likely to graduate in any given term in our analysis, even controlling for student decision, enrollment intensity, and academic performance" (p. 207). Although student backgrounds play a role in time to degree, ensuring closer attention is paid toward proper academic advising will help students avoid excessive major changes and increase the chance of on-time graduation.

Beyond the common factors related to persistence, Niu and Tienda (2013) felt it necessary to examine common attributes related to persistence and study how the various types of high school students attend influence their college persistence. Their model compared students from poor, average, and affluent high schools. Niu and Tienda (2013) showed:

> Compared with students that attended average high schools, students from affluent high schools were 2.78 times as likely to remain enrolled or receive a degree relative to dropping out; and graduates from poor high schools were .64 times as likely to persist in their pursuit of a baccalaureate degree versus withdrawing from college. (p. 42)

Students from affluent high schools were five times more likely to graduate, while poor high schools were only half as likely to graduate.

### Student Departure Theory

Literature regarding student attrition, retention, and persistence is extensive. Researchers such as Vincent Tinto examined departure behavior and found that past studies lacked adequate conceptualization of the withdrawal process (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's model of student departure theory asserts the necessity of effectively and proactively retaining students goes beyond students' first year. Tinto's model of student departure argues explicitly that the longitudinal process of student persistence, and by extension, the process of student departure, can be envisioned as being made up of distinct stages through which new students typically pass during their college careers (Tinto, 1988). Tinto's (1993) model of student departure emphasizes how:

> Individuals enter institutions of higher education with a variety of attributes (e.g., sex, race, ability), precollege experiences (e.g., grade-point averages, academic and social attainments, and family backgrounds (e.g., social status attributes, value climates, exceptional climates), each of which has direct and indirect impacts upon performance in

college. More importantly, these background characteristics and individual attributes also

influence the development of the educational expectations and commitments the

individual brings into the college environment. These goals and institutional

commitments are significant predictors of and reflections of the person's experiences,

disappointment, and satisfaction in that collegiate environment. (Tinto, 1975, 95–96)

However, engaging students in the first semester to their eventual persistence until degree

completion is critical (Tinto, 1975). Equally important as reducing the barriers to prevent

departure is the need to address the barriers for students who wish to return to finish their

education.

## Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a perspective that emphasizes the centrality of race and

racism and challenges white supremacy in law, education, politics, and other social systems

(Patton et al., 2016). CRT was derived during the mid-1970s as a response to the failure of

critical legal studies (CLS) to address the effects of race and racism adequately in U.S.

jurisprudence (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). According to Harris (1994), CRT would "link the

methods of critical legal studies (CLS) with the political commitments of 'traditional civil rights

scholarship' in a way that would both revitalize legal scholarship on race and correct the

deconstructive excesses of CLS" (p. 741). Among the most famous CRT theorists identified as

the pioneers of this movement were bell hooks and Delgado. There are four basic tenets of CRT.

The first tenet described *racism as ordinary*. According to Delgado et al. (2017), "Ordinariness

means that racism is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged" (p. 8). Racism is

usually related to the notion of colorblindness, a "formal" conception of equality, expressed in

rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board and can thus remedy only the

most blatant form of discrimination (p. 8). The second tenet is *interest convergence* because "racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it" (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 9). The third tenet described *race as a social construct.* "The notion of the permanence of racism suggests that racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). The fourth tenet detailed the understanding individual lived experience through *counterstories.* Delgado et al. (2017) stated:

> The hope is that well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others. Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world. (p. 49).

Counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Some CRT frameworks address various social constructs simultaneously. Solórzano et al. (2000) theorized,

> The critical race theory framework for education is different from other CRT frameworks because it challenges the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact communities of color. (p. 60)

Using CRT to examine the intersectionality between social constructs is most pertinent to the future of higher education. Patton et al. (2016) posited, "Higher education scholars using CRT

illuminate how people of color have been ignored or made invisible in research that guides the field" (p. 29). However, Harper et al. (2018) suggested that "racism encountered in classrooms and elsewhere must be explored alongside other commonly investigated factors concerning access and achievement" (p. 21). One common factor is examining how microaggression affects students of color with higher education.

Some researchers have varied definitions of *microaggressions*. Minikel-Lacoque (2013) argued that "microaggressions are derogatory acts that are often unconscious on the part of the perpetrator, as commonplace occurrences, and as offenses that have alternative, non-racial explanations that often cause the targets to feel conflicted and invalidated" (p. 459). However, Sue et al. (2007) broadened the meaning of microaggressions to be brief (intentional or unintentional) daily exchanges that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. These exchanges appeared in three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. According to Sue et al. (2007), these forms are described as:

> Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color. Microinvalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. A microassault is an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. (p. 274)

Lewis et al. (2021) explored the relationship between interpersonal racism, such as racial microaggressions, and sense of belonging among students of color and found racial microaggressions predicted sense of belonging. According to Lewis et al. (2021), "African

American students experienced a greater frequency of racial microaggressions and reported a lower sense of belonging on campus than Asian, Latinx, and Multiracial students" (p. 1049). Von Robertson et al. (2016) used CRT to examine issues of race, inequality, and unfair treatment of Latino/a students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) and found that "the impact of racism and racial microaggressions was related to verbal assaults that minimized their culture and heritage" (p. 8). Moreover, Sue et al.'s (2007) examination of racial microaggressions revealed that racial and ethnic minority groups experience microaggressions differently, all in a negative manner, which results in harmful behavior causing lower self-esteem.

**Conclusion**

The literature review aimed to understand the foundation of student attrition research, explain the departure process, and address some common characteristics that have been shown to influence withdrawal behavior. As higher education institutions find it difficult to recruit new students, new strategies must be implemented to address why students leave after they enroll. Colleges and universities have put minimum effort into investigating the reasons why students are stopping out and returning to complete their degrees. Students' ability to persist in completing their degree and their decision to depart is affected by how successfully they manage their postsecondary experience.

This study examines the factors contributing to the student's withdrawal, the reasons for their return, and any retention strategies and programs used during the stop-out and re-entry processes. Johnson (2006) presumed that gaining a better understanding of stop-out behavior would allow administrators to develop intervention strategies to increase the number of returning students and minimize the duration and frequency of stop-out episodes. Horn and Lyle (2021) recognized that the reasons students leave and their motivations for returning are so often

personal it presents a great opportunity for improving retention strategies and ensuring access to a person who can be an ongoing relational support system. "There is a compelling story that ought to be told: stopped out students are overcoming obstacles and returning to finish their degrees as colleges are making adjustments targeted at seeking to ensure that these students can successfully complete" (Horn & Lyle, 2021, p. 13). Although students experience departure for various reasons, ensuring they have the proper resources at all stages of transition will be extremely beneficial. Failure to uncover the possible causes of why students stop out will further contribute to higher education institutions experiencing deficit budgets, loss of state or federal funding, and potential reduction of staff. Finding ways to increase enrollment will give way to the creation of better programs that invite students who stopped out back to complete their degrees with minimum barriers.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more. Postsecondary administrators are challenged to find viable solutions to increase retention and persistence while decreasing student attrition. Specifically, these challenges are reflected in the decreased graduation rates of student populations, such as first-generation, low-income, and minoritized students of color. Harper et al. (2018) stated that "'Minoritized' is used instead of 'minority' to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities" (p. 21). Angulo-Ruiz and Pergelova (2013) posited commitment and drop/stay decisions are influenced by the work of the higher education marketers and administrators, how they position the institution in prospective students' minds, and how they communicate the institution's image to the public.

Adjusting the culture and recognizing the impending demographic shift in the United States population could serve as a starting point to reduce the rate of student non-completion in the university sector. Attrition rates have been increasing for the last several decades. Learning why students withdraw and return will give administrators insights into addressing the growing problem.

There is abundant quantitative research on attrition behavior, retention, and persistence. Still, many studies fail to acknowledge the population of students beyond dropouts, such as students who drop out and return to college. Stratton et al. (2007) suggested that many of the data decisions are set to analyze attrition report enrollment at only two points in time, usually initial enrollment and then either one term or one year later, and hence cannot identify those students who reenter following an interruption. In this chapter, I outline and discuss the methodology used to implement this study.

## Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions: 1. What experiences contributed to the student's withdrawal from the institution? 2. What experiences contributed to the student's return to the institution? and 3. What retention strategies and programs were used during the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes?

## Research Design

Qualitative research can go beyond measuring data to provide depth and richness to the student experiences. We conduct qualitative research to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships between a researcher and the participant in a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research used a qualitative phenomenological method to investigate influences contributing to the initial stop-out behavior and decisions leading to re-enrollment. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a description of its essence, allowing for reflection and analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This phenomenological study will add to the existing literature, using Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and critical race theory (CRT; Delgado et al., 2017) to

gain insight into how to reduce stop out behavior and reduce the barriers that students who wish to return to finish their education.

<div align="center">**Participants**</div>

The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: Undergraduate students who attended a public college and universities who identified as Black or African American, were enrolled in 12 or more credit hours before they stopped attending classes, were absent from the institution for more than one year, and reapplied and accepted for readmission during the period of January 2015–December 2019. This timeframe was chosen as it reflects the pre-COVID-19 era. Goldberg (2021) wrote, "COVID-19 has amplified challenges for many students looking to pursue postsecondary education, with students of color and students who are caregivers confronting significant and disproportionate new challenge to entry, staying in school, and finishing on time" (p. 32). The following table provides a detailed description of each participant. The categorical data were intentionally used to narrow down students for the study.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Gender | Initial University Enrolled | Stop Out | Reenrolled University | Re-entry Semester | | Last Declared Major |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Talisha | Female | Purdue University Northwest | Fall 2018 | | *Past due balance | | Pre-Biology |
| Alicia | Female | Purdue University Northwest | Summer 2010 | Indiana Northwest | Summer 2023 | First-generation | General Studies-Education |
| Shantel | Female | Indiana University Kokomo | Spring 2018 | Indiana Northwest | Spring 2023 | First-generation | General Studies-Psychology |

| Makayla | Female | Indiana University. Northwest | Summer 2018 | Indiana Northwest | Spring 2022 | First-generation | Elementary Education (Visual Arts) |
|---------|--------|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Marques | Male | Georgia Southern University | Fall 2019 | Augusta University | Fall 2020 | | Business |
| Lashawn | Female | East Georgia College | Fall 20126 | Augusta University | Summer 2023 | | Communication |
| Breasia | Female | Georgia Military College | Fall 2014 | Augusta University | Fall 2021 | | Integrated Studies-Education |
| Kendrick | Male | Augusta University | Spring 2015 | Augusta University | Fall 2023 | | Sociology |

Eight students accepted the invitation to participate in this study. They attended public institutions in Georgia and Indiana. All the participants, six females and two males, identified as Black or African American. Three participants considered themselves first-generation college students. Four participants attended four-year public institutions in Indiana, and four attended four-year public institutions in Georgia. Seven participants stopped out from their institutions between 2010 and 2020 and reenrolled between 2020 and 2023.

**Participant Recruitment**

The area of investigation was Black or African American students from 4-year public universities in the United States. A national search was chosen to increase the chances of accessing participants that fit the criteria. The participants were recruited using a network-based method known as snowball sampling. Snowball sampling uses natural social networks and is often used for hard-to-reach, "hidden" or marginalized populations (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017; Noy, 2008). In this process, the researcher accesses informants through contact information provided by other informants (Noy, 2008). Multiple attempts were made to recruit

participants from various 4-year public institutions nationwide to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Indiana State University approved the initial consent to conduct the study. Additional consent was obtained by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Augusta University and Clayton State University. The Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at Indiana University Northwest granted permission to invite students to participate in this study due to having full IRB approval.

Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Interim Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at Indiana University Northwest, the faculty department advisor from Augusta University, the Advising Directors from Clayton State University and Columbus State University, and the Assistant Dean of Students at the University of Chicago.

## Data Collection

The study employed an inductive process to collect data to build a connection to the current research conducted on student attrition and persistence. A phenomenological approach was used to collect data to understand what led students to stop out and reenroll to complete their degrees. The purposeful sampling involved at least eight participants who dropped or stopped out of their academic institution and returned to continue their education after being out of college for a year or more. The invitation to participate in the study on behalf of the principal investigator was sent via email. The email introduced me as the PI, outlined the purpose of the study, and requested the student to respond to me directly if interested in more details about the study. No more than two reminders were sent to the students.

When a student expressed interest, a response email was sent to provide an introduction of the researcher, provide information about confidentiality, and ask the student to respond to the email if they had continued interest in participating in the study and their desire to schedule an

in-person interview. If the student expressed a desire to continue with the study, I followed up

with a telephone call to introduce myself formally to discuss the study, build rapport by sharing

my professional and personal experiences as they relate to the study, familiarize the students

with the interview structure, and confirm their student status, absence from the university, initial

stop out, and ethnicity. Once the interview date was scheduled, the students were sent a copy of

the consent form and were asked to submit an unofficial copy of their university transcripts. The

unofficial transcripts were used to further verify their institution determine student status, credit

hours, stop out date, and return dates between January 2015 and December 2019.

This study used semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher

asks open-ended questions and, when appropriate, probes further in relation to the participant's

description of the phenomenon (Mason, 2004). Each interview was about 45–60 minutes long

and recorded to capture the phenomenon's essence. Only the researcher and the participant were

present during each meeting. Twelve questions were asked during the interviews, designed to

facilitate discussion relevant to the research questions. The instrumentation for this study

consists of an interview protocol (see Appendix A). All participants are given documentation

about the study's purpose before the interviews. During the interview, I discussed the purpose of

the study, confidentiality, the participant's right to withdraw from the study without penalty, and

the potential benefits of being a part of this research.

Participants arranged the interview based on availability. All interviews were conducted

in person or via Zoom. Participants who participated in the in-person interview received a $20

gift card by email. The principal researcher sent the gift card to the participant's email.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used based on the research questions to process each participant's responses and allow for adequate coding. The interviews aim to produce in-depth descriptions of the phenomena, which address the behavior patterns of the participant's desire to stop out and then return to a four-year institution after not being enrolled for one year or more. In the initial analysis stage upon transcription, the data are coded and then grouped by salient themes. Data are reanalyzed after forming the initial themes to identify additional themes related to the research questions. Data collection ceased once saturation was achieved, and no new themes emerged.

The interviews are recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The virtual interview transcriptions were printed, and audio-recorded interviews were uploaded to a Word document to allow for interpretation. All interviews were analyzed using an inductive approach that examines comparative themes. Each transcript was assigned a pseudonym to protect anonymity and was thoroughly read to identify emergent ideas. Student interviews were transcribed, and identifiable information was removed to ensure confidentiality. Applying these methods in data collection allows investigators to examine participants' conscious experiences, which leads to the analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation from diverse data sources and allows for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). In the final analysis phase, I compared how the theory of student departure and critical race theory impacted the students' stop-out and return behavior. The collected data were organized and stored on an external hard drive or a data management system to protect the anonymity of participants. Participant's contact information is stored separately, and their personally identifiable information will not be published or presented publicly.

**Validity and Reliability**

Trustworthiness is a validating aspect of a study; it supports whether the findings of a study are reliable, which ultimately depends on the data collection and analysis (Marrero & Milacci, 2018). Based on the ideas of Cypress (2017), "Rigor of a naturalistic inquiry such as phenomenology may be operationalized using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (p. 257). To ensure participants' responses were credible and accurate, a participant review was conducted after interviews were completed to check for statement accuracy. A peer review or debriefing process provided an external check of the research methodology to shed light on my bias and gain a different perspective on the presented data. This process was used to report findings representative of participants' lived experiences and generalizable across other studies related to student attrition. The findings are presented helpful to the reader, and their interpretation was consistent with the stories being told. As the researcher, I drew upon my professional and personal experiences to build trust and empathize with participants' lived experiences.

**Triangulating Data**

I enhanced the study by conducting member checking to examine participants' responses to ensure the findings were credible. Peer review or debriefing was used to shed light on my bias, to gain a different perspective on the presented data, and to question the standards of the employed methodology. I acted in a manner that was appropriate and ethical to ensure the data were collected, analyzed, and reported, which is essential. I strive to provide thick, rich descriptions so the study can be replicated by other studies related to student attrition.

Due to the nature of the topic and my work in higher education, I take an unbiased, blended (insider and outsider) approach to understanding the lived experiences of students who

chose to drop or stop out and return to their academic institutions. My status as an insider will stem from my 20 years of experience as an advising administrator. I used my professional experience to connect with the participants. When participants expressed their feelings toward the challenges experienced that led them to drop out or stop and return to college, I remained objective with their stories.

## Summary

The decision to leave a college or university may be permanent for some students—especially those who feel marginal in the first place—other students will take time off to clarify academic and career decisions, deal with external circumstances, or grow up (Barefoot, 2004). This chapter addressed the methodology used to obtain data in this qualitative phenomenological study exploring the experiences that led undergraduates to stop out and subsequently return to college after being unenrolled for one or more years. The data collected are analyzed and compared to Tinto's theory of student departure (1993) research and critical race theory (Delgado et al., 2017) to provide a theoretical base for this research.

The next chapter focuses on the three non-intimidating or introductory questions used to gain background information and discuss their decision to enroll and transition into college. The sub-themes among the participants included the lack of college preparation, the lack of knowledge regarding options available after high school, and the lack of support before stopping out. Chapter 5 further discusses the emergent themes of employment, changing major interests, and schools.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS I

The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more. This chapter aims to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of Black or African American college students who enrolled, stopped out, and returned to persist to graduation.

**Talisha**

Talisha attended Purdue Northwest University at 17 years old. She is from a two-parent household and is the youngest of three siblings from northwest Indiana. Her education was

funded by her parents; therefore, she decided to forgo living on campus. She aspired to major in pre-physical therapy, but it was not offered as a major, and she had to settle on declaring pre-biology instead. Talisha said she had minimum options when deciding on her life after high school. Even though her older siblings had attended and graduated from college, she still wanted the power to choose her path. Talisha shared,

> They made it feel like my only option. I did not think there were many other options after high school, just because all my peers and high school advisors said all you need to do is [fill out] all these college applications.

Talisha found her transition to college difficult because she was expected to navigate the college journey as a new adult versus being constantly given direction in high school. The increased freedom in college caused her to eventually stop out.

My interview with Talisha took place via Zoom on a Saturday morning. We scheduled it due to her relocation to Texas, and it worked best with her family's schedule. Talisha was extremely excited about the opportunity to share her experiences. She explained that she was actively planning to re-enroll in the fall 2023 semester to begin coursework for the Occupational Therapy program but first had to pay her outstanding bill to obtain her transcripts. Talisha realized college was a big learning curve when she was younger, but now being married with a child has given her a new outlook and motivation to complete her bachelor's degree. She acknowledged that returning to school would now be challenging because her parents no longer pay for her education. Talisha acknowledged that she would have to do a better job at managing her time and money. Even though she is motivated, organized, and has a different mindset than when she first attended college after ten years, she feels it is always possible to follow your dreams.

**Alicia**

Alicia is a senior General Studies major with a concentration in education at Indiana University Northwest. She is scheduled to graduate in the fall of 2024. She was raised in northwest Indiana and is a first-generation college student. Her father passed away when she was four years old, leaving their mother as the sole provider for her and her four siblings. The fall after graduating high school, she enrolled at Purdue Northwest University in 2010. Alicia was unsure which academic pathway to pursue at PNW; she was torn between nursing and education. She wanted to major in education due to her love for helping care for the neighborhood's minor children at an early age. Alicia's interest in Nursing came from taking care of her mother, who suffered from seizures. Alicia perceived her transition to college to be difficult as she found out during her first semester that she was expecting a child. This news led Alicia to work multiple jobs to afford her first apartment and support her child while attending school. Alicia had no car and relied on public transportation to attend school, work, and back home. These events contributed to her obtaining her associate degree in liberal arts early childhood education after three years so she could begin teaching for a Head Start program to gain some work experience in an educational environment.

The interview with Alicia took place in person at the local Starbucks in Merrillville, Indiana, on a Saturday morning. We decided to meet on a Saturday morning due to her work and school schedules and her obligations as her sister's caregiver. Alicia arrived with her laptop, book bag, and travel mug. She planned to study following our interview as she had some time to spare before her next appointment. Alicia was full of energy and personality. I could tell this is how she always presented herself to others, as she had acted the same way in our previous

conversations. She spent most of her life serving as a caregiver to her family members but was determined to be the first in her family to graduate from college.

**Shantel**

Shantel is a junior Psychology major at Indiana University Northwest. She is a first-generation college student from Gary, Indiana. Shantel is the youngest of her siblings and the only one to attend college. In her senior year, Shantel had only applied to one college. In the fall of 2017, she enrolled at Indiana University Kokomo (IUK) as a Pre-Occupational Therapy major. She applied to attend IUK because she received a scholarship and figured it was a terrific opportunity to be on her own.

The interview with Shantel took place in person on a Saturday morning at Lake County Public Library in Merrillville, Indiana. Shantel arrived at the study room dressed in her work attire. She explained that she had come from working an overnight shift and apologized for her tardiness. Shantel knew she had the motivation to attend college but was unsure of her career trajectory. She experienced serious challenges before she attended college that contributed to her reasons for stopping out. In her junior year, her mother informed her that she would have to attend another high school at the start of her senior year. Her mother had accepted a new job an hour away in Michigan City, Indiana. This transition proved difficult as she would not graduate with the friends she had known since third grade. Shantel's parents had announced their impending divorce after over 20 years of marriage. Her father had begun to spend less time with her and her siblings and eventually moved away and remarried.

While at Indiana University Kokomo, she stated the transition proved stressful as she had never been away from her family. "I remember my first week. I cried because I was never away from my family. I felt so lonely, but I got a scholarship there, so I went there." Shantel enjoyed

her experience at IUK, even though they did not offer on-campus housing. Before her first semester ended, she began to incur financial struggles due to her lack of reliable transportation and ability to afford off-campus housing. Shantel decided to leave Indiana University Kokomo after one semester and attend Indiana University South Bend, a sister institution, to be closer to her father, who had once again fallen ill.

Shantel enrolled at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB) in the spring after leaving Indiana University Kokomo. She majored in Biomedical Science because IUSB did not have a pre-occupational therapy program. Shantel experienced challenges immediately upon enrolling at IUSB. She registered for classes late, discovered she had to pay rent once she moved in with her father, and that her work hours conflicted with her class schedule. All these things led her to leave Indiana University South Bend and return to Michigan City to attend the local community college. When expressing what she wishes she had known before enrolling into college, Shantel expressively conveyed, "I wish I would have known that sometimes it is ok to start at a two-year college like a community college to see if you like college and then transition. You could get your core classes done, you know, the easier ones, and then go into the heavier caseload."

**Makayla**

Makayla received a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education from Indiana University Northwest in May 2023. Makayla is a first-generation student from Gary, Indiana. She is the youngest of three children. Makayla was awarded the 21st Century Scholarship to attend college. The 21st Century Scholarship is awarded to students who reside in Indiana, stay on track academically, and refrain from illegal drugs and alcohol. Students sign up for the program before entering 7th grade. The scholarship covers tuition costs at any public college or university in

Indiana. Makayla first attended Indiana University Northwest (IUN) as a Pre-Dental Hygiene major.

In her sophomore year, Makayla changed her major to Education with a concentration in visual arts. The change required her to complete the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) required for education majors. As with any standardized exam, the CASA exam costs a fee to take and became another unexpected fee she had to cover. The CASA test determines a person's skill level, aptitude, and ability to apply them in the classroom or workforce (see website below for citing). The exam consisted of three subtests: reading, math, and writing (CASAS, 2024). Makayla took the CASA test four times, and each time, her score declined. She only had three classes remaining in her core curriculum, but she could not take any major courses needed to meet the full-time status because she had not successfully passed the CASA test. Any credits taken less than full-time would require her to cover her own tuition. She wished to avoid paying out of pocket, so leaving college had become her only option.

The original in-person interview with Makayla was supposed to occur in the spring in Gary, Indiana. She canceled because she needed to study for her midterm exams. I reached out once at the end of the semester to see if she was still interested in participating in the study. Makayla expressed her continued interest. We rescheduled the interview to take place virtually via Zoom on a Wednesday during lunch hours. Makaya explained she was at a local Starbucks in the Gary-Merrillville area. She appreciated the opportunity and expressed her gratitude for the ability to share her story. Makayla described her transition from high school to IUN as seamless, but she did not like the classes she took in her first year. She struggled with the financial aspect of attending college. Even though she had a scholarship that only paid for her tuition, she was perplexed about how to cover the remainder of her costs. Makayla shared:

I was really confused about that going in, and my school financial office wasn't that helpful at all. They gave me the bare minimum, and when I asked for more, they kind of, you know, frustrated me. So, I wish I had more information and more people who were willing to break it down for me as an 18-year-old.

Makayla knew she wanted to attend college from an early age: "I just knew I wanted to go to college to make my family proud and just have independence and not allow them to worry about expenses." Makayla's siblings all received a 21st Century Scholarship to attend college, but she was the only one in her immediate and extended family to complete college. College was not considered a big deal in her family, but she was determined to make her mother proud.

## Marques

Marques attended Augusta University as a Business major. He has a younger brother from his parents and stepsiblings from his father. His family currently resides in Augusta, Georgia. Both of his parents attended college and have earned several degrees among themselves. After graduating high school, Marques was an entrepreneur major at Georgia Southern University (GSU) in Statesboro, Georgia. He lived in on-campus housing. He expressed his desire to major in Orthopedics when he first enrolled, but later changed his major several times based on his family's pursuit of a new company.

The interview occurred in person on a Monday morning at Augusta University, Summerville Campus in Augusta, Georgia. Marques attended a private Christian college preparatory high school on the west side of Augusta. He explained that his high school experiences had encouraged and prepared him for the rigors of college. He was raised as what he described as a "military brat." His family moved around significantly due to his father's enlistment in the military. Marques was not concerned about paying for college as his father's

military career had afforded him the opportunity to receive benefits from the GI Bill program. The GI Bill program covered education costs for veterans and their dependents to attend a training program or college. It provides tuition and fees, a housing allowance, a books and supplies stipend, and the option to transfer these benefits to family members under certain circumstances (VA, 2024).

Marques maintained good grades at Georgia Southern despite participating in sports and working. He commuted to Augusta weekly to work in his family's water supply business. Marques's commute from Statesboro to Augusta continued for two years until he eventually transferred to Augusta University in the spring of 2018 to be closer to home and work more consistently in the family business. While at Augusta University, he majored in Business. Marques stated that his time at Augusta University was filled with many distractions. He juggled classes, sports, a fraternity, and working in the family business. Joining a fraternity, he explained, brought a great deal of distraction to his already intense situation. Preparation to join the fraternity coincided with his preparation for his final exams. His desire to be in the fraternity took priority over his willingness to achieve passing grades, resulting in his grades suffering. Eventually, he succumbed to all the distractions and was academically suspended from Augusta University.

**Lashawn**

Lashawn is a senior Communication major specializing in marketing and advertising at Augusta University. She shared that she is the third oldest of five children: two older brothers, a younger brother, and a fraternal twin sister. She is the younger twin by a matter of minutes. Lashawn stated they were raised by both parents in a strict household in Augusta, Georgia. Her mother has a bachelor's degree in business administration, and her father has a middle school-

level education. Lashawn graduated high school in 2015 and enrolled at Augusta Technical College.

The interview occurred in person at Augusta University, Summerville Campus in Augusta, Georgia, on a Tuesday afternoon. Upon arrival, she stated she needed a little extra time to get together before we started the interview, as she had just left her last class. Lashawn was excited to share her experiences and was very thankful she was chosen to share her story. She discussed at length the difficulties she experienced before enrolling in college. Lashawn shared that she was unprepared for college due to a lack of opportunities and a less-than-stellar reputation at her high school. She said:

> We were not fortunate enough to go to one of those higher education schools. The teachers there weren't fully into it. I mean, the school had a reputation for not being the best school. My school's reputation did not prepare us to understand the GPA or the mindset of what's next, which is college. We weren't educated on the whole GPA and SAT aspect.

Lashawn was determined to make the best of her experience by participating in school activities. "I decided to take the extra mile to become a leader of the art committee, the person to host the junior and senior dances. I was that helper in school." After graduating from high school, she attended Augusta Technical College. She found the environment at Augusta Technical College to be very different than expected. "There were a lot of older people there, and I wanted the college experience with a younger crowd." She then decided to apply to Augusta University to become a softball player.

Lashawn was devastated to learn she had not been accepted to what she described as a "high name or prestigious school." Even though I was sitting there in tears, I was saying, "This is

not happening to me, I wanted to be a softball player. I wanted to go to Augusta University." Her father had opened the letter and said it was another letter in the envelope. It was an offer letter to attend East Georgia State College. She explained:

> They partner with different colleges and high schools. If you are not able to get into that school and you want to get into [a college], here's a first step you can take to get into that school. East Georgia State College program allows students to earn an associate degree (60 credit hours) and transfer to Augusta University if they meet the GPA requirements.

Having been raised in a religious household, Lashawn thought it was just not God's plan to attend AU at this moment. She settled upon attending East Georgia State College as this could be a step in the right direction to eventually get accepted into Augusta University.

Lashawn received her associate's degree in General Studies from East Georgia State College in the summer of 2018 and transferred to Augusta University in the fall of 2018. She majored in Communication with a concentration in Marketing and Advertising. Lashawn failed to overcome her challenges and experienced a setback at Augusta University. Her grades suffered, and she was academically suspended at the end of the spring of 2019. She immediately appealed her suspension and was reinstated in Fall 2019. Once she resumed her studies, she learned that in the fall of 2020, the university would shut down in-person classes and move to an online format due to COVID-19. Not knowing how long it would take for the university to resume normal operations, Lashawn took the opportunity to pursue a full-time job as a marketing coordinator.

**Breasia**

Breasia received a Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Studies with a concentration in Education from Augusta University in Augusta, 2023. She is currently enrolled in the Master of

Arts in Teaching at Augusta University. Breasia was raised by her mother in Augusta, Georgia. She has five stepsisters on her mother's side and one stepbrother on her father's side. She is the only child of her mother and father. Her mother and father were separated when she was born. Breasia's mother is a high school dropout. Her father has a bachelor's degree and will earn his master's in 2022 after retirement. Breasia decided to take a semester off after graduation from high school to explore her life choices. In the Spring of 2011, she enrolled full-time at Georgia Military College (GMC) as a Pre-Nursing major.

The interview was via Zoom as her work and family schedule could not accommodate an in-person interview. Breasia had missed the original interview date. I contacted her later to verify if she was still interested in participating in the study. We rescheduled it for later in the week on a Friday morning. Upon logging onto the interview, Breasia explained that she was using the time she spent prepping lesson plans to take part in this interview. She did not mind interviewing because the students were scheduled to go on a field trip later in the day. Breasia was very emotional during her interview when she discussed the challenges she experienced in high school with her parents and raising her children.

Breasia shared that she did not have a good high school experience. She thought the staff at her high school focused more on student athletes than 'regular students.'

> I wish there was more focus on helping students find a career field. I feel the athletes got more attention. If you're not part of doing sports and not truly shining with a GPA.

> Regular students didn't get as much attention and guidance. We were the lost students.

Breasia described her life at home as being fragmented. She indicated the lack of familial instability had played a role in the challenges she and others experienced in high school. Breasia shared:

Most of my classmates were foster students, and some of them came from broken homes like me. We had abusive childhoods. A lot of us were working and going to school, like me. There should have been more. Being in an area that the school is in and the demographics of students at the school, I feel like there should have been more focus on helping students beat statistics. We were kind of left to our own devices at some point.

Breasia and her three friends relied on each other for support because, as she stated, "Their parents weren't big in their life. My mom kind of was like you are adults, once I had reached 15 or 16 years old." In her senior year, she took a college tour to Augusta (State) University with her friends. This is when she first began to entertain the notion of going to college. While at Georgia Military College, Breasia was still unsure if going to college was the right choice. "I was just going to college because that was the thing to do." Breasia discovered she was expecting her first child a month into the semester. After the birth of her daughter, she got married, bought a house, and had a second child. All these events led her to drop out of Georgia Military College. She enrolled at Brunel University to study Early Childhood Education, "I don't want to do nursing anymore. I wanted to become a teacher and did that for a little bit and decided, no, I don't want to be a teacher. I want to be a nurse." She attended Brunel University for a short time and switched her degree plans back to nursing.

Her journey from high school to the present took on many forms. She explained that it was all done with little to no support. She said,

Honestly, I don't feel I've ever had much support. It was so hard. My lack of support makes me more supportive of my children. I am involved in everything they do. During my high school years, I didn't have much to look forward to, so that was rough.

Breasia admitted that she wasted a great deal of time and money and made a lot of excuses, but she finally found her passion—becoming a teacher.

**Kendrick**

Kendrick is a junior Sociology major at Augusta University. Kendrick is the youngest of three children: one older sister and a fraternal twin brother. He is the younger twin by several minutes. They were raised in what he considered a 'nuclear Christian household' in Beech Island, South Carolina. His parents have been married for over 30 years and have college degrees. His mother has a master's degree in criminal justice, and his father completed a bachelor's. Kendrick attended Augusta University in the fall of 2013, intending to major in music education.

The interview occurred in person at Augusta University, Summerville Campus in Augusta, Georgia, on a Tuesday morning. Kendrick wore athletic clothes and stated he had to coach his female high school basketball team later that afternoon. I could tell he had a great sense of humor and was nervous as he began telling jokes during our introduction. We briefly discussed his role as a coach and then proceeded with the interview. Kendrick discussed the challenges he experienced in high school and transitioning into college. Kendrick attended Silver Bluff High School in Aiken, South Carolina. In high school, he was known for being a comedian, "I got in the regular amount of trouble for someone that thinks they are funny." He stated that he never got expelled but often received in-school suspension and very rarely after-school suspension because of it.

Kendrick was a drum major in high school. He played the trombone and the euphonium. This encouraged his love for music. He dreamed of becoming a Band teacher. After graduation, he aspired to attend Coastal Carolina University to major in music. Kendrick applied and was

offered a chance to audition for acceptance into the school. His dad accompanied him to the audition and encouraged him to play the trombone over the euphonium. His audition went very well, and the staff was impressed with his music skills. They would accept him if he could retake his SAT and score higher. Unfortunately, Kendrick's parents, mainly his mother, would later decide against him attending Coastal Carolina University. Kendrick stated that his parents did not allow him to retake the SAT. He also expressed that he was unaware that his mother had signed him up to take the SAT; otherwise, he would have better prepared himself to take the test, "I'm like, I would study for it this first time." Kendrick was not convinced that the decision not to attend Coastal Carolina had much to do with money but more with his parents not wanting him to attend a different college than his twin brother, who had been accepted to attend Augusta University.

Kendrick would hang out in the student activity center or the game room when he was not in class. He began practicing the same behavior he was used to in high school by not completing his assignments: "I was not going home and doing homework at all." Kendrick was placed on academic probation at the end of his first semester. He struggled with his grades after the spring 2014 semester and was academically suspended.

## Summary

This chapter provided narratives of the eight participants and how their familial background, high school experience, and transition into college played a role in their stop-out-and-re-enrollment behavior. All participants identified as Black or African American and attended four-year institutions before their stop-out experience. Two participants did not immediately begin their academic journey at a four-year university but later enrolled in one.

Participants were recruited to take part in the study if they identified as Black or African American, enrolled in full-time hours before they stopped attending classes, were absent from the 4-year public institutions for one year or more, reapplied and accepted for readmission during the period of January 2015–December 2019. Chapter 5 presents the themes and findings from the study results. the student's typical routine, reasons for stopping out and reenrolling, and factors related to the stressors they experienced that caused them to stop out.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS II

The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more. This study strived to answer the following research questions: 1. What experiences contributed to the student's withdrawal from the institution? 2. What experiences contributed to the student's return to the institution? and 3. What retention strategies and programs were used during the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes? The interview protocol aimed to explore the individual characteristics that impacted the participants' student attrition and return behavior. The following dominant themes were produced: pre-collegiate challenges, issues related to employment, limited use of campus resources, lack of commitment, external and internal support, and job advancement. Additional themes related to major changes and academic standing were produced due to the analysis of student transcripts.

**Transition to College**

The 6-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time undergraduate Black students in pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree institution was 40% compared with 64% of White students; the rest are still struggling through or have dropped out, most of them with debt but no degree (Marcus & USA Today, 2023). The participants responded to various questions during

the interview process related to how their experiences in college influenced the reasons why they stopped out and/or returned to college to pursue a degree. The students discussed how their experiences in high school contributed to various challenges once they enrolled in college.

College readiness for African American students has customarily centered on the deficiencies of students, families, and communities, but their lack of academic achievement is often accredited to environmental and cultural differences that impact school performance (Bryant & Center for Law and Social Policy, 2015; Stewart, 2007). To understand the participants' delayed progression, they discussed how their transition to college influenced their reason to stop attending college. Their responses gave insight into the type of high schools they attended, the level of support their families offered when choosing to attend college, and the lack of options available when deciding to attend college. Marques and Makayla described their transition to college as positive. They both mentioned that their transition to college had little or no effect on their reasons to stop out. Marques conveyed that because he attended a college preparatory school, it 'overly prepared' him for the rigors of college. Makayla said her transition to college was 'seamless' and expressed how she did not enjoy her first-year courses. She felt the classes were not challenging enough and was convinced she was placed into the courses due to her low SAT scores. Makayla expressed:

> I hated it because they were giving me these classes I knew I could do. It was the free pre-composition course. I write well. English isn't the problem for me, but since I did so bad on my SAT, which just explains a lot because I have test anxiety.

The remaining participants affirmed that their enrollment into college was negatively influenced by their high school experience and contributed to why they stopped out of college. Participants reflected on the lack of care for their future and spoke of the over or under-

involvement of staff/parents, and high schools were not encouraging students to go to college or providing viable options for students that do not want to attend college and struggling with the college they attended as not being their first-choice schools.

Talisha believed her transition to college was challenging for several reasons. First, she lacked options regarding the path she wanted to pursue after high school. She claimed, "They made it feel like my only option. I didn't think there were many other options after high school, just because all my peers and high school advisors said all you need to do is [fill out] all these college applications." She explained that the second reason it was challenging was the lack of guidance she had begun to experience once on campus. In high school, she was used to her teachers and parents guiding her through various processes, but she had to figure things out independently once on campus. "They literally, right up into your senior year, said you have to do this to get these credits, and as soon as you get into your freshmen year of college, it is your responsibility to do it." Lastly, she said it was difficult to adjust to college due to the lack of attention others displayed when it came to turning in assignments or showing up to class. In high school, she would receive detention for not completing assignments, but in college, she would receive a failing grade if she did not submit an assignment.

Shantel's difficulties with transitioning to college, which contributed to her stopping out stemmed from changing high schools and the divorce of her parents in her senior year. She explained:

> It was a different transition, not having friends. But during this transition, my parents went through a divorce. They were married for about 20 years, and then my dad got remarried. So, dealing with that whole process, he sort of didn't spend as much time with us, so that was sort of hard.

Alicia found her transition to college challenging because she had to rely totally on the money received from her financial aid package to pay for college. She did not have transportation and had to take the local bus to get to school and back home. Combined with the challenge of learning, she became pregnant in her first semester of college.

Breasia explained that she did not have a good high school experience. It was due to her problematic home life and the lack of concern the staff at her high school gave to 'regular students.' Breasia said:

> I wish there was more focus on helping students find a career field. I feel like the athletes kind of got more attention. If you're not part of doing sports and not truly shining with a GPA. Regular students didn't get as much attention and guidance. We were the lost students.

In addition, Breasia described her home situation as fragmented. She expressed that:

> A majority of my classmates were foster students, and some of them came from broken homes like me. We had abusive childhoods. A lot of us were working and going to school, like me. There should have been more. Being in the area the school is in and the demographics of students, I feel like there should have been more focus on helping students beat statistics. We were kind of left to our own devices at some point. Me and my three friends relied on each other for support because their parents weren't big in their life. My mom was like 'you are adults,' once I reached 15 or 16 years old.

Breasia and Alicia experienced pregnancies early in their academic journeys. Like Alicia, Breasia found out a month into her first semester she was expecting her first child. After the birth of her daughter, she got married, bought a house, and had a second child. All these events led her to drop out of Georgia Military College.

Lashawn spoke of the barriers she experienced when she transferred to Augusta University that led to her reasons to stop out. She found it difficult to integrate into Augusta University's environment.

> It was a difficult transition because going from being a student ambassador to being able to go out and help them with talking to high school students from where you are now and what you achieved just being that spotlight person to advertise your school. With going to Augusta University, there are a whole lot of students on "go, go, go! It's assignments nonstop, and you really must be in that mindset to want to continue to push on, and the dedication and discipline must be there.

Lashawn also had to navigate this challenging transition by working multiple jobs, trying to keep her grades up, and a lack of connection with AU staff and faculty. She has thrived under the mentorship received from the East Georgia staff, whom she considered family. Lashawn was also experiencing some personal challenges:

> The household was getting to be stressful. I'm a Black female growing up in a 'strict dad' household. I want to have leeway to experience life, but at the same time, I also want to know what is good for me while also trying to balance a long-distance relationship.

Lashawn failed to overcome her challenges and experienced a setback at Augusta University. She was suspended in the fall of 2019 due to not meeting the academic standards to remain enrolled. "It was a lot, but it was all that stuff that negatively affected my academic career, but the determination and dedication were still somewhere there in the back."

Kendrick described his transition into college as challenging. In high school, he was known for being a comedian. Kendrick stated that he never got expelled but often received in-school suspension and very rarely after-school suspension because of it. He considered his

grades to be good but admitted that his personality contributed to teachers giving him a great deal of leniency on his assignments, "The biggest takeaway from high school was I think I was too personable, and I think my teachers were little too willing to cut me slack and let me turn in thing late." Every year, he would get a batch of work that he would be required to complete. The teachers would say to him, "You're going to have a 'C' when you should really have an 'A' because you have 67 homework zeros." Kendrick knew he could do the work but chose to do the minimum to graduate.

Lashawn and Kendrick explained their difficult transitions to college due to not being accepted to the colleges of their choice. After high school, Lashawn enrolled at Augusta Technical College, dreaming of attending Augusta University. Her dad was the parent who pushed for education within the household and had opened the letter that said she had not been accepted to attend Augusta University (AU). She was devastated to learn she had not been accepted to what she described as a "high name or prestigious school. "Even though I was sitting there in tears, I was saying, "This is not happening to me, I wanted to be a softball player. I wanted to go to Augusta University." The envelope contained an additional offer letter to attend East Georgia State College. Lashawn stated:

> They partner with different colleges and high schools. If you are not able to get into that school and you want to get into [a college], here's the first step you can take to get into that school. The East Georgia State College program allows students to earn an associate degree in 60 credit hours and transfer to Augusta University if they meet the GPA requirements.

Lashawn settled upon attending East Georgia State College as this could be a step toward eventually getting accepted into AU.

Kendrick was motivated to go to college by his parents, "I had to go. It wasn't one of those things where I was like, you can go to college, or you can go into the workforce. That was not an option. You are going [to college]!" After graduation, he aspired to attend Coastal Carolina University to major in music. Being a drum major in high school encouraged his love for music and his pursuit to become a band teacher. His dad accompanied him to his audition and encouraged him to play the trombone over the euphonium. His audition went very well, and the staff was impressed with his music skills. Unfortunately, his mother decided against him attending Coastal Carolina University. Kendrick conveyed:

My mom was just kind of like, nope! My SAT was 1130, and they were like, do you think you could get 1200 [on your SAT]? I was like, yes, I took it once. I didn't know I was taking it that day. My mom just woke me up and was like, 'Don't you have something to do this morning?' I'm like, no! They said if I could get 1200, they could find scholarship money.

Kendrick stated that his parents did not allow him to retake the SAT to enter Coastal Carolina University. "They just said they weren't going to pay for me to take the test again if I weren't going to study for it. I'm like, I would study for it this first time. They said you should have studied for it the first one." Kendrick was not convinced that the decision about Coastal Carolina had much to do with money because his parents were using savings bonds they had contributed to for their children since they were young. Kendrick was convinced that his parents did not want him to attend a college different from his twin brother's. Kendrick and his twin brother attended Augusta University the fall after graduation.

**Internal and External Influences**

Poor college adjustment might be underlying the relatively low retention rates among minority students compared to their increased presence on university campuses (Krajniak, 2015). The data described the types of stressors and barriers they experienced that led them to stop out. The participants' responses gave insight into the struggles encountered when trying to acclimate to the college environment. All but one participant mentioned the stressors and barriers they experienced that led them to stop out.

Talisha indicated she struggled with time management and procrastination, leading to hanging out with friends rather than attending class. She went from someone watching over her constantly in high school to no one helping her stay on track in college. This behavior gave her a false sense of freedom. This increased sense of freedom brought more pressure to fit in with her friends. Her grades began to suffer due to excessive class absenteeism and procrastinating in completing assignments. She began hanging out during class breaks in the residence halls' lounge areas. Eventually, she began skipping class sessions altogether. Talisha revealed:

> It was so crazy because I lived 20 minutes away from the school. I would literally wake up at 7 a.m. to go to my 8 a.m. class, and I would go hang out with people in the lounge. The campus did have dorms, and I had friends who were in the dorm, so I would go hang out with them there until their class started and we walked over. I was just not being smart.

When Talisha began to feel the impact of her poor choices, she used course withdrawal to avoid failing grades. She thought this was a way to avoid the decline in her grade point average (G.P.A.). She stated:

I got behind with not doing homework and not attending classes. Playing that catch up game is hard. You miss a day or two in college, and it's like you did miss three chapters or so the stress of just like having to play catch up. But then, I was not motivated to want to catch up. I can take this class next semester if I drop it now, or can I get administratively withdrawn?

Shantel noted that she enjoyed her experience at Indiana University Kokomo but began incurring financial struggles due to her lack of reliable transportation and ability to afford off-campus housing. "I was staying across the street at the annex apartments but it's expensive, like $600 per room. So, I ended up leaving there." After one semester, Shantel left Indiana University Kokomo and transferred to Indiana University South Bend, a sister institution, to be closer to her father. Her decision to attend IUSB was untimely and affected her class schedule, "I waited so late to do my classes. I had classes Monday through Friday, starting at 8 am. Some days, I had to go up to 6 p.m., so super late." In addition to registering for classes late, moving with her father proved difficult due to the strained relationship with his new wife. Shantel declared:

> It was hard because the relationship between me and my stepmom wasn't the best. Right when I got there, they had an extra room and everything. She decided to turn that into her office and [said] you could stay in the basement.

Eventually, Shantel's grades began to suffer due to working overnight shifts. She specified:

> It was difficult to make it to her early morning classes. My grades started to slip because the home where I was staying was rough. So, when I finally got a car, I would go to [Michigan City] to my mom's because she had a bed.

Marques recalled that his stress came about when he transferred to Augusta University. His time here was filled with many distractions. In addition to attending classes and working,

Marques tried out for various sports teams, including track, shot put, and javelin. He had also begun pledging for a predominately White Greek Letter fraternity. He proclaimed:

> Joining a fraternity brought a great deal of distraction to my already intense situation. Fraternity life was one thing I would say I appreciated, but I kind of regret it because it absorbed so much time. I wanted to be like one of the boys kinds of things, which also distracted me from school. Preparation to join the fraternity coincided with my preparation for his final exams. My desire to be in the fraternity took priority over my willingness to achieve passing grades, resulting in his grades suffering.

Lashawn spoke of the barriers she experienced when she transferred to Augusta University that led to her reasons to stop out. She had to navigate this challenging transition by working multiple jobs, trying to keep her grades up, and lacking connection with AU staff and faculty. She has thrived under the mentorship received from the East Georgia staff, whom she considered family. Lashawn was also experiencing some personal challenges:

> The household was getting to be stressful. I'm a Black female growing up in a 'strict dad' household. I want to have leeway to experience life, but at the same time, I also want to know what is good for me while also trying to balance a long-distance relationship.

Lashawn failed to overcome her challenges and experienced a setback at Augusta University. She was suspended in the fall of 2019 due to not meeting the academic standards to remain enrolled. "It was a lot, but it was all that stuff that negatively affected my academic career, but the determination and dedication were still somewhere there in the back."

Kendrick experienced stress from starting his college career at Augusta University, beginning with his major of interest. He had planned to pursue music education, but during orientation, a bad interaction with a music faculty member immediately caused him to change his

major. The music faculty required him to take a music test to gauge his knowledge level. The

situation did not end well:

> The rest of the orientation group left to do a tour. I was a good musician and could also
>
> read music, but this was not an easy test; it took ten minutes for six pages front and back.
>
> I didn't have a pencil for the first three minutes, and he left the clock running. I'm just
>
> sitting there. I didn't have anything to write with, I had to knock on the door. He finally
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> comes, and it's like: I'll get you a pencil. He says it just wouldn't be fair if I restarted the
>
> time because you had a chance to look at the test. Yes, but I couldn't write.

Once Kendrick's time was up, the music faculty told him that he would be placed in a remedial

music course. He angrily refused and said, "I ain't never been remedial, shit. I will just change

majors." After this interaction, he immediately changed his major to Political Science with a

concentration in Pre-law. Additionally, Kendrick and his brother shared a car, so they had to

schedule their classes around the same time so they could arrive at school and depart home

together. He would hang out in the student activity center or the game room area when he was

not in class. Kendrick was practicing the same behavior he was used to in high school, not

completing his assignments. "I was not going home and doing homework at all. I wasn't a

dummy, but I was 'pretty dumb' because I wasn't doing nothing else." He struggled with time

management in high school. Kendrick said he was used to "just smiling and being oblivious," but

he realized that he had to work hard in college. He declared:

> In high school, they say, "you not going to have a homework pattern in college. It's just
>
> going to be tests and quizzes. That's not true. They give you a whole lot of homework,
>
> too. They may not grade it. It is still homework, and then a lot of them graded it. They

graded it all. Every teacher I had here graded the homework. I've never had a teacher that did not grade.

Kendrick also mentioned his difficulties with his parents and their decision not to let him attend Coastal Carolina University. He felt resentment for not being allowed to retake the SAT and suspected that his twin brother had an undiagnosed disability that contributed to their decision. I asked him if he thought it was about the money, and he replied:

No, they just said they weren't going to pay for me to take the test again if I wasn't going to study for it. I didn't realize how well we were doing until I got out. I happened to see my mom's W2's and I was like, 'We had this?' I think they were too invested in having somebody there to look after him. I'm like, he doesn't need it. He made friends way before I did.

After his first semester at AU, he was put on academic probation. It was approaching the end of this first semester in spring 2014. Kendrick said, "I feel like internally, I knew I wasn't going to get it together. I was hurt, and I couldn't go back and retake the SAT." Soon after, Kendrick received a letter from the Registrar's Office informing him that he was academically suspended. He took this chance to pursue modeling.

Alicia did not thoroughly elaborate on her stressors and barriers. She mentioned being conflicted about her major choices (nursing vs. education), her limited knowledge of the financial aid process, and the pressure of being a parent to a minor child while attending college. After three years at Purdue University Northwest, she decided to pursue an associate degree in liberal arts early childhood education instead of a bachelor's degree so she could begin teaching for a Head Start program to gain some experience to put on her resume.

**Not Using Resources**

For Black people to thrive and flourish, it is not just about effort, as one can thrive in one aspect of life; however, to be holistically successful by flourishing, one needs the right environment (i.e., people, resources, time, space, support; Prempeh & Freeman, 2023). The participants described the resources they used on campus. However, a few participants did not understand what resources meant until I provided a clearer explanation. Some participants said they did not use campus resources, but after further conversations, it was found that they all visited a support office or contacted a professor at least once. Several participants directly mentioned using tutoring at least once and meeting with their academic advisors, success coach, professor, and other support services. However, their experiences were not always positive.

Talisha gave an account of when she was at Purdue University Northwest; she did complete her assignments, but she would wait until the last minute, which made completing the requested assignments stressful. She did not seek the academic support offices or campus staff's help. Talisha did express that she had a relationship with a few professors in her prerequisite classes, "If I missed a day, they would reach out or email me to give me the opportunity to make it up or do extra credit work or something like that." She felt comfortable asking the professors for assistance who expressed interest in her well-being. Due to their extension of grace on coursework, she usually did well in these classes.

Alicia explored the various resources available at Purdue University Northwest to make an informed decision on which path to pursue. She said her academic advisors proved to be of limited help when deciding the most appropriate major. She would go to the advisor for assistance with the curriculum or to learn what prerequisite courses were needed but was not provided with the help. "I got an advisor, but I couldn't make the advisor break things down.

After two years, I started making my own bingo sheets." Alicia used the Disability Services office when she was diagnosed with a learning impairment, dyslexia, and test anxiety. Alicia revealed:

> I used everything in the library, including the writing lab. They had one that you could go into, and it was for people with dyslexia. To this day, I don't know. I probably am. I don't care. I still managed to get by, and with technology nowadays, it's even better to help. I managed.

Shantel connected with her academic advisor early in the semester while attending Indiana University Kokomo. She developed a great relationship with them as they provided great insight into what to expect from the major curriculum, were helpful, and encouraged her to do well academically. She had learned that she could declare any major to pursue a career in occupational therapy if she took the proper prerequisites. When she transferred to Indiana University South Bend, she attempted to utilize academic support resources but found the experiences troublesome. "I went to tutoring, and then they were in there talking out loud about other students, and it just made me feel uncomfortable." Shantel was forced to speak with an academic success coach due to her declining grades. Her success coach tried to encourage her to stop working and get her to only focus on school, but she knew she could not quit her job. She needed the money to pay rent.

Makayla became highly frustrated, confused, and unmotivated to continue in the education program. She took the CASA test four times while at Indiana University Northwest, and each time her score declined. She spoke of not being able to utilize campus resources due to her work schedule. Makayla expressed:

Because of my schedule, I couldn't take advantage of the learning services. I know they

had it, but I didn't reach out. I guess my head wasn't in the right. I didn't have the right

motivation at the time. I was more concerned about just balancing myself trying to prove

that I'm being a responsible adult. So, my mom doesn't have to worry about me.

After multiple failed attempts to pass her required tests, Makayla finally contacted her academic

advisor for guidance. She shared:

I talked to my counselor about it. He was as helpful as he could be, but ultimately,

because it was my junior year, I couldn't move on with college. I only had about 2 or 3

electives left, which wasn't enough for me to make my scholarship. I needed to be full-

time for my scholarship. I was left with no other option but to drop out. That was the

most stress I have ever been under in my life.

After speaking with her advisor, she contacted the 21st Century Scholars office to explore her

options. The scholarship office recited the program requirements for students to complete 30

credit hours yearly to maintain the scholarship. Any credits taken less than full-time would

require her to cover her own tuition. Makayla only had three classes remaining in her core

curriculum, but because she had not successfully passed the CASA test, she could not take any of

the major courses needed to meet the full-time status. She wished to avoid paying out of pocket,

so leaving college had become her only option.

Lashawn stated that she had not used any resources before she left Augusta University.

She added she had once tried to utilize Career Services but said, "It was getting me nowhere

because I didn't have a specific vision of what I wanted to do." She admitted that she wished she

had utilized more clubs and organizations on campus as they would have better prepared her for

a career. Breasia recalled during her time at Augusta University while in the Pre-Clinical Lab

program, she had gone to the professors for assistance with her precalculus and chemistry classes but felt they were neither helpful nor supportive. She did not feel like this program was a good fit, "It was just overwhelming, not being able to catch up and not being able to get it," so she dropped out. Marques stated that during his time at Augusta University, "Resources I should have taken advantage of would be like after hours, one-on-one with professors. When it comes to professors, I'm extroverted. When it comes to other students or other peers, I'm introverted."

Kendrick acknowledged that he had not utilized any resources while at Augusta University. He admitted that he had never logged on to the AU website, checked his grades on POUNCE, or looked at his grades in the online course platform, D2L. He was afraid to approach his professors for fear of conveying himself as less than, "I was like, you are weak if you have to talk to your teacher." He once visited with his academic advisor, who proved to be unfriendly. Kendrick declared:

> They didn't care. I came in and sat down. I went to tell her my name, but she stopped me and said, "I can see it on the computer screen." I sat down and just sat back, and she said, "I got you down for this, this, this, this." You want to change any of them? She said, I guess not!" She said, "Well, this is what you got this semester," and I said, "Alright." I signed the form, and I just walked out.

Kendrick did not understand why his advisor would act this way towards him. He knows she probably had a large caseload but felt with 20 minutes allotted to him, she should have been more caring and concerned about his well-being. "Maybe they're meeting a lot of people, but this is a small university, and everybody has a time slot. If you do not care about me, you do not have to care about me, but this little 20 minutes you do." He continued to see his academic advisor each semester to get cleared for registration. "I can vividly remember being in the office

and never actually saying anything. There was no point." He would sit in her office quietly until she signed off on the courses he would need to register for the next semester.

**Support Matters**

While the transition into college provides an opportunity for many students to become more independent of their families, for some minority groups, it might further complicate it (Krajniak, 2015). Black bachelor's students are twice as likely as other bachelor's students to have additional responsibilities as caregivers or full-time workers — 36% vs. 18%, respectively (Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2023, p. 7). The participants described the type of support they had before deciding to stop out. Some mentioned having a family member or mentor to turn to when deciding to leave school, while others made no mention of received support of any kind.

Shantel recollected conversing with her mother about her struggles with her current living conditions and declining grades. Her mother suggested she decide whether to live with her father in South Bend or move back to Michigan City. Shortly after speaking with her mother about her situation, she informed her success coach of her plans to move back to Michigan City. The success coach told her she missed the deadline to withdraw from her classes without penalty, and if she chose to withdraw, she would owe the school money. Shantel felt she had no option but to stop attending classes. She never formally withdrew from her classes, substantially dropping her grade point average (GPA). Shantel moved back home with her mother in the middle of the semester and enrolled at the local community college in Michigan City.

Talisha's parents supported her but stipulated they would pay for college if she stayed interested and showed them her grades every semester. After two years and declining grades, Talisha became discouraged with college and chose to work over attending school. She realized she would have to discuss her plans to stop attending college with her parents. "I ultimately

decided I needed to step back and maybe rethink my major or something. What is my passion?" Talisha expressed that her parents were grateful for her honesty and respected her decision to stop attending college. She said:

> My parents understood and said, okay, if you don't want to go to school, that's fine. Thank you for not continuing to waste our money for years and years down the line, but since you are stopping, if you do decide to go back, you are responsible for trying to come up with a monetary contribution towards school.

Makayla revealed that she came from a very supportive family. Even more so when she decided to change her major. She stated:

> My family is very supportive, and once they realized that I switched my major to education, they were even more supportive because they knew this was something that I could thrive in, and they were super excited for me. I received a lot of support from my aunts, grandparents, parents, and siblings. They were very excited for me.

Also, when Makayla was faced with the decision to stop out, she recollected:

> When I was faced with the possibility of leaving, when I knew time was running out, I started to get in a depressed mode. It is difficult to remember at the time because I kind of blocked it out. My family could only help so much of me because of the test. It's math. Either you know it, or you don't. I think the main thing that made it difficult for me was managing my time, and I was not allowed to use a calculator. I mean, their support was just words of encouragement.

Marques juggled classes, sports, a fraternity and worked in the family business. Before his suspension, he knew it was necessary to talk with his father about what he was experiencing. He said:

I talked to my dad and sat down with him [and] had a conversation about does it make sense to continue the financial debt: If you're not one taking it seriously or two, is it going to be beneficial for you if you graduate? Then, are you going to not know anything more than what you already know or accomplished right now? I was just like, man. It makes more sense that I'm involved in the business right now doing it this way versus just because school teaches you to be workers, not owners of stuff. That's when I was like, I'm done.

Lashawn received support from East Georgia State College while enrolled at Augusta University. During the interview, she often mentioned how the EGSC was instrumental in helping her navigate her challenges or celebrating her successes. She considered the EGSC staff to be family. "The staff, faculty, the president, they are all awesome. I still talk to them to this day; they are like my mentors. They are like family to me."

**Employment**

Tinto (1988) posited that the primary difference between 'stopouts" and permanent withdrawals is not that they experience any different external demands on their time but that the former's commitments to college and experience on campus are such as to draw them back into college when external situations change (p. 65). Low-income students tend to have higher risks of dropping out than the other income groups and are influenced by many factors, including financial aid (Chen & DesJardins, 2010); their decision to persist or drop out is often influenced by the amount of aid awarded. Chen and DesJardins (2008) analyzed the racial/ethnic gaps in student dropout risks and whether these gaps can be mediated through financial aid provision and timing. They sought to understand whether student aid mediates the relationship between

parental income and student drop behavior. Their research determined that low-income students received the most financial aid, including Pell Grants, subsidized Stafford, and Perkin's loans.

The participants responded to a supplemental question related to their employment before deciding to stop out. Many of them disclosed that they had worked at least one job while attending college, which contributed to their stopping out. A full-time job, particularly if it involves activities that separate the student from the mainstream of campus life, may be a significant distraction from studies and social life (Astin, 1999, p. 590). Talisha was not excited about her choice of major due to the math and science requirements, stating, "There's a whole bunch of math, a whole bunch of science. It was too much thinking right now. I just want to party." Money motivated her since she lived at home with her parents and was not required to pay bills. Talisha got a job as a waitress/bartender, working up to 39 hours a week, just below the full-time employment status. At first, she only worked on the weekends but then began to pick up hours during the week, often working 8-hour shifts.

Alicia explained that she worked at multiple fast-food restaurants and held an on-campus position as part of the Federal Work-Study program. Shantel found out that she was required to pay rent once she moved in. This led to her finding a job, "I got a job at Walmart because my dad told me I must pay rent while I was there. It ended up being an overnight job." Talisha recalled that since she lived at home with her parents and was not required to pay bills, she decided to get a waitress/bartender job. At first, she only worked on the weekends but then began to pick up hours during the week, often working 8-hour shifts. Talisha frequently worked close to 40 hours per week, just below full-time employment status. Talisha expressed:

> I said, oh, I'm at home. I don't have to pay any bills. Let me make a little money. I was
>
> working, plus school and social life, and it was just very hard. I was like, I can't do this

right now. I ultimately chose work over being in school because I started to get

discouraged with the classes I was taking, thinking that I'm not really interested in school

right now, I'm not ready.

Makayla was responsible for gas, books, and other items she needed to thrive in college.

Her mother and stepfather were low-income, so they could not contribute to her education costs.

Makayla was forced to get a job to cover the incidental expenses. Makayla juggled work and

school a lot throughout her college career. She revealed:

I need to take care of myself on my own. I worked. I was out either working or at school.

I was full-time that entire time, with five classes. I tried to fit those five classes in

between 6:30 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., and after that, I was working. So, I didn't get home

[until] maybe about 6:30 p.m. every day.

Marques's schedule left little time for him to relax truly. He gave up football after some

time and began working at his family's water supply business. Marques's interest soon shifted to

business and entrepreneurship. Once the business became profitable, Marques frequently

traveled from Statesboro to Augusta to work in the family business. "I would go home every

Friday and work from when I got home to when I headed back to [school] on Sunday night.

Pretty much like every weekend, 99% or 96% of the time." Marques maintained good grades at

Georgia Southern despite participating in sports and working.

Lashawn began working at several jobs while attending classes. Her parents did not force

her to get a job, but she did begin working to gain some independence from her parents.

Lashawn said:

Living in a household with a lot of people in it. Yes, Mom and Dad they were working,

but you want to have a sense of independence and bring in your own and buy your own. I

am a college student, so why do I need to continue to rely 100% on my parents? I want to provide for the house, too. I want to buy some milk and cereal for myself, so why not?

Breasia's employment history was complex. She began working at an early age. At Georgia Military College, she wasn't fully committed to staying in college. She worked at two fast-food restaurants and attended in-person classes. Breasia worked full-time when she started the Pre-Clinical Lab Science program at Augusta University. She said:

> I had been working as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) for about six years when I worked at Augusta University Children's Hospital. I had been working there for a few years, and I decided, well, I'll try being a lab tech. I started the Clinical Laboratory program. However, I didn't feel like it was it. I just ended up dropping out of school, and then after that, my marriage started to decline.

Breasia left the hospital after six years, opened her own cleaning business, and enrolled at Augusta University again. "I was running my own cleaning business and said I needed to learn more about the business. My cleaning business made me happy at first; it was successful. However, after a while, I was getting burned out." She then began exploring other job options and became a long-term substitute teacher with the Richmond County School District.

Voorhees (1985) examined the impact of student finances on the persistence of first-year students in high financial need and found that non-campus-based loans and grants showed positive direct effects on new first-year students' persistence regardless of the type or amount of campus-based aid. The amount of household income and financial assistance from internal and external sources, such as grants and loans, can determine a student's success in college. Stratton et al. (2007) indicated that "those receiving a grant were less likely to withdraw, and those receiving a loan were more likely to withdraw than students receiving no financial aid" (p. 476).

**Re-Enrollment Process**

Black students were 22% less likely to earn a bachelor's degree within one year of re-enrolling than the national average of 25.87% (Causey et al., 2023). When attempting to reenroll back into the university to pursue their degrees, the data showed that most of the participants were helped by a staff or faculty member to reenroll in their prior or new institution. More than one participant had to submit an academic appeal to get reinstated into the university.

Shantel attempted to enroll at Indiana University Northwest in the fall of 2020 to complete her bachelor's degree in psychology. When she went to register for classes, she was told by an Admissions employee that she could not declare a psychology major due to her grades and would have to 'start over' as a General Studies major instead. Shantel was confused because she thought her grades were high enough to transfer into the program, "I was like, ma'am, I brought my GPA up at Ivy Tech to a 3.0." She was also told that she did not qualify for financial aid and would have to pay out of pocket. Although she was working several jobs, she couldn't afford the classes she would take. Her family was not in a situation to assist financially. "They would help financially when they could. They tried when they could. It was sort of a lot of just like figuring out on my own, to be honest." Shantel began exploring options to fund her return to school, so she contacted the financial aid director at IUN for assistance. Shantel revealed:

> I was just stuck. I don't know how to pay for it, so finally, in the middle of the fall semester or around that time, I decided, OK, I will go back in spring [2023]. Let me see what I need to do. I emailed the head of financial aid, and I just talked to her on the phone. I said, are you going to help me pay for things?

The Financial Aid Director helped her develop a plan to reinstate her aid. Shantel had to submit a statement explaining her situation and why she deserved a chance to return to complete her degree. During the process, Shantel learned from the psychology advisor that she qualified for the psychology TSAP track. She had been on the psychology TSAP track when she attended Ivy Tech. The Financial Aid Director reviewed her TSAP or Transfer Articulation Pathways as part of the plan to ensure she would have sufficient funding to complete her bachelor's degree if her request was granted. Transfer Articulation Pathways or TSAP allows students to transfer fully certain associate degrees as the first two years of instruction toward a companion bachelor's degree (Ivy Tech Community College, 2022–2024). Shantel's appeal was accepted, and her aid was reinstated. She could not contain her excitement when she spoke of all the wonderful assistance, she received to continue her education at IUN. She proclaimed:

> I would say throughout college, besides IUK, it's been the best process. You know everyone is very communicative there because that is what I am big on communication. Just explain stuff to me. They even told me one of my classes was cancelled, so I switched it out really quickly.

Makayla had a slightly different experience when she tried reenrolling at Indiana University Northwest in 2020. She had been out of college for two years before she started to explore her return to finish her degree. Makayla went so far as to contact her former education advisor but was told he was no longer with the program. She was then referred to speak to a different advisor, whom she considered unwelcoming and unfriendly. Makayla recalled:

> He was like, these are the classes you need to take. It really wasn't as personal, welcoming, or motivating as I wanted it to be. I was like, maybe I don't need to do this, and he wasn't responding to me. You know I was telling him I had special circumstances.

We were emailing back and forth, but it wasn't as quick as I wanted [him] to answer. By the time he replied to me, my motivation was gone.

After reaching out to multiple people at the university and getting no results, it would be another year before she would build up her confidence to re-enroll. In 2021, she reached out to yet another employee at IU Northwest, this time it was the head of the School of Education. She expressed that she was uneasy speaking with a stranger because they did not know her situation. Makayla felt more comfortable seeking guidance from someone she knew that would be able to relate to her situation.

Makayla decided to contact her old Dental Hygiene advisor, who had helped her switch to education. She had built a good rapport with her and felt she would be the best person to steer her in the right direction to reenroll in the education program. "I let her know I was ready to come back, and she was really helpful. She was hands-on." Her former advisor pulled her transcript, mapped out her courses, and gave her an anticipated graduation date. She told her that she would have to retake the CASA test. Instead of diving right in, the advisor suggested she take the practice tests first. Makayla was intimidated hearing that she had to retake the CASA test. This made her once again second-guess her return to school, but she was grateful to her old advisor for assisting with this process. She said:

> She gave me everything exactly as I needed instead of having to repeat myself from step one. She knew exactly where I ended up on. It was no frustration at all as it was with the last guy, so she helped, but I was very intimidated with the fact that I had to retake that test and it was all three subjects again. I was out of school for two plus years, and I was intimidated by the thought.

Makayla did not follow up with reenrolling after the conversation with her former advisor. When she did decide to try, it was too late. She contacted her former advisor in 2021 and successfully reenrolled in the spring of 2022.

Marques left Augusta University for a year due to academic suspension. During this time, he could determine if he wanted to continue his pursuit of a degree. He later returned to complete his degree because he saw his peers graduating, "I felt kind of less than not graduating but at the same time of all the people who haven't even [gone] to college made a life for themselves." Although he knew he should not compare his situation to another person's, Marques was determined to enroll back in college to find himself. He met with the head of the Business department during his attempt to get reinstated at Augusta University. He had to convey the reason why he deserved to re-enroll. Marques submitted a written statement of why he should be reinstated and set up a meeting to discuss his intentions and why he deserved a second chance. Once readmitted, Marques progressed at Augusta University for another two years until the end of Fall 2020, when he was dismissed from the institution. As time progressed, he began questioning the value of obtaining a college degree. I was like, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to stay in school because I'm essentially learning and doing it hands-on." He is four credits away from senior status and has no plans to reenroll in college.

Breasia finally got serious about college in the fall of 2022, where she re-enrolled at Augusta University. Her main objective was to graduate as quickly as possible with a degree so she could pursue a graduate degree in education. Breasia messaged her former business advisor, who put her in touch with the Integrated Studies program faculty advisor. The Director of the Integrated Studies program came up with a plan for her to graduate in a short amount of time. Breasia recalled:

I enjoyed academic advisement over the business program. The advisor was great; I'm happy now. She was very helpful; she went over my transcript. She said you know you could have your degree completed by the summertime. I was so excited. I said that's what I want to do. Let's get me switched over. I want to start as soon as possible. The process was really easy. I'm very happy, and I'm not sure what the difference is but I do feel like there's more support now. I'm not afraid to ask questions, or if I'm struggling with something, everybody's been really helpful and just great.

Talisha reached out over two years of not being enrolled at Purdue University Northwest to find out how to change her major from pre-biology to psychology. "I was thinking of doing something with the mind, like clinical psychology. I didn't want to go that specific yet because I knew my boundaries. I spent time out of school. I'm older now and understand. I had a clear vision of what I wanted." Talisha began working with a psychology advisor to see how many credits would transfer. She learned that most prerequisite class credits would transfer to her new major, leaving her to complete the remaining core classes. She said:

I had multiple meetings even before getting back enrolled. It was already starting off differently than my first time in college. I was able to get it changed, but at the same time, I don't want to be too specific about it. I know I want to work with kids. I know I have a good heart to help people, so I changed my major to psychology.

After the interview, I contacted Breasia again in the fall of 2023 to see if she had reenrolled in college. At the last update, she had learned that she had a balance on her account, which prohibited her from beginning coursework and obtaining her official and unofficial transcripts.

**Why Did I Re-enroll?**

The participants discussed reenrolling back into the university to pursue their degrees and specifically mentioned that they were inspired to return to college by a family member. One participant was inspired by their peer to re-enroll but later expressed no desire to complete their degree.

Kendrick traveled abroad to South Africa as part of his modeling career. He was also offered the opportunity to be in commercials. Upon his return to the United States, he was reinstated at Augusta University in the spring of 2015. He attended and completed the semester, then began working at the Bridgestone tire plant working with his father. This job gave him the opportunity to enroll at the University of Arizona Global-Ashford, tuition-free. He took online classes at the University of Arizona for two years. During this time, Kendrick said his girlfriend was his biggest supporter due to his declining relationship with his parents. Kendrick was motivated to reenroll when his girlfriend-turned-wife was enrolled at Augusta University to complete her master's degree.

> She needed all the help. She was always playing stuff out loud and would ask me or say I don't understand that and would have me try to chop it up on laymen's terms. Just being there with her through that part of the journey. If this is her working on her master's and she coming to me. I can do this.

Lashawn began to contemplate her next move, whether to pursue another job or explore going back to school to finish her degree. Her family relationship was strained so she could not ask them for advice,

> My family wasn't really trying to hear what I had to say, so there's no reason to pour my
>
> emotions on my family because they just don't get it. We are all built differently. We are
>
> created with a different mindset.

The group of people she consistently relied on for advice were her mentors at East Georgia,

whom she considered family. Ultimately, it was her fiancé that encouraged her to reenroll in

college. She shared:

> I said, what about income for the house? You know, for the kids, I want to help you with
>
> that stuff. Although he has a very good job, I still want to be that person that's kind of
>
> independent because that's what I have been taught. That's how I was raised. He said,
>
> just go ahead and do it. Suck it up and, in the end, get what you want from it, and who
>
> knows what may come from it.

> Alicia began pursuing an Education major at Indiana University Northwest in the fall of

2022. Due to her low GPA, she had to settle for a General Studies major with a concentration in

Education. When asked about her motivation to graduate with a bachelor's degree, she stated, "I

love working with the kids and seeing them and caring for them.

> Talisha eventually stopped attending Purdue Northwest but continued to work as a

bartender for 2½ years before she quit and started working with children. When she began

working with children, she entertained the possibility of returning to college. Talisha's older

sister worked as a manager at a childcare center, which influenced her decision to return to

college. She said:

> I want to be like my big sister, like just hearing her experience because she did have her
>
> bachelor's degree. It wasn't in psychology, but she did have that higher education, and
>
> she was passionately talking about it, and I was like, that is interesting. The more I

worked, the more knowledge I was able to acquire, and then just hearing her talk about her stories, I liked the managerial side of it.

Marques left Augusta University for a year to determine if he wanted to continue his pursuit of obtaining a degree. As time progressed, he began questioning the value of obtaining a college degree. "I was like, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to stay in school because I'm essentially learning and doing it hands-on." He later decided to return to complete his degree because he saw his peers graduating, "I felt kind of less than not graduating, but at the same time, all the people who haven't even [gone] to college made a life for themselves. Once readmitted, Marques progressed at Augusta University for another two years until the end of Fall 2020, when he was academically dismissed from the institution. He is four credits away from senior status and has no plans to reenroll in college.

**Lack of Job Advancement**

In discussing the re-enrollment process, the participants shared that the lack of job advancement played a role in their decision to return to college. Shantel, Lashawn, and Breasia mentioned how the lack of job opportunities motivated them to return and continue their pursuit of obtaining a degree.

Shantel was frustrated with the lack of advancement at work, and it motivated her to look to enroll back in college. She is working at a domestic violence and women's shelter. In 2021, Shantel began looking into enrolling at Indiana University Northwest (IUN) to complete her bachelor's degree in psychology. Shantel was influenced to return to college due to a lack of advancement in her current job. She explained she was self-motivated to reenroll:

I was like, you're so close; at least get that. The job I'm at now is very frustrating because I've been there; it will be four years in August, and I just feel I'm being overlooked for so

many job opportunities that come up because I don't have a bachelor's degree or master's. It's frustrating, and I have work experience and everything.

Lashawn took the opportunity to pursue a full-time job when Augusta University navigated COVID-19 protocols in the fall of 2020. Not knowing how long it was going to take for the university to resume normal operations, she decided that this would be the best time to get her career started. Lashawn worked as a marketing coordinator, handling social media accounts, promoting companies, and making event appearances. Lashawn thought:

> This is the best thing in the world, and this is what I want to do: promote companies. I was at the job for at least six months strong. I started in one position and got promoted two weeks later to the marketing and advertising position. Although I am an honest worker, there are people out there in the world who just want to throw you under the bus for their own personal gain, and I experienced that, so I lost my job because of it. It was something to learn from, I guess, but that could have been the final straw for me to go back to school, but I didn't.

Not feeling safe returning to campus, Lashawn decided to work for another marketing and advertising company. In researching this new company, she discovered its high turnover rate. Their employee turnover was very high from what I saw online, but me being super desperate and having a huge passion for marketing and advertising, I was like, ok, if they offer me this job, I'm going to take it. I am going to try my best to keep it. After a couple of months in, I got let go because she said, 'We are letting you go because you work too smart and not hard enough.' I'm assuming the smart part was me putting together my proposals and all these other extras, but although I wasn't reaching my goal, I was bringing in new clients they couldn't get.

Breasia worked at Augusta University Hospital for six years before reenrolling at Augusta University in the spring of 2021 because she was running her own cleaning business. Her business became profitable, and she could care for her children without assistance, but she still felt something was missing. Breasia reached out to her father for some guidance. She shared:

> You know I'm doing well in school, earning my business degree. I'm just not happy. I've been going to school for so long, chasing my education, but I feel like I don't have a purpose. My dad said, you need to think about what your passion is. You need to think about something you could imagine yourself doing for the rest of your life, but you would do it for free without a paycheck.

Breasia immediately thought of her children and how she enjoyed being a mother. Her father suggested she explore being a substitute teacher. He also encouraged her to contact her aunt, who started her career as a schoolteacher, became a principal, and is currently working overseas as a teacher. Breasia had finally found her passion to become a teacher. She contacted her aunt to map out a plan on how she would complete her goal of becoming a teacher in the shortest possible time.

**Change of Major**

The participants in the study discussed how their interests motivated them to declare a major when they first enrolled in college but later changed due to difficulties experienced within the major, the institution not offering the major of their choice, or other obstacles that forced the students to pursue a major change. Shantel only applied to one college in her senior year of high school. In the Fall of 2017, she enrolled at Indiana University Kokomo (IUK) as a Pre-Occupational Therapy major. Shantel enrolled at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB) in the spring after leaving Indiana University Kokomo. She majored in Biomedical Science because

IUSB did not have a pre-occupational therapy program. Once Shantel moved back with her mother, she enrolled at Ivy Tech Michigan City, majoring in Psychology.

Makayla's original plan for coming into college was to major in dental hygiene and receive an associate degree. Makayla was required to pass every class as a stipulation of her scholarship. In the first semester of her sophomore year, she took a lab science course, which proved challenging. Makayla said, "I took Anatomy and Physiology and bombed it. That was a sign. This is not where my heart is because I didn't like it at all, so I felt like I needed to switch to something different." At this moment, Makayla knew this was not her calling.

After much thought and research, Makayla knew she had found joy working with children and considered becoming a teacher. She had chosen a career in dental hygiene based on the amount of money she would make after graduation, "I just pretty much was ignoring it because teachers are known for not getting paid well, and as an 18-year-old, we always think of money over fulfillment." Makayla knew her love for visual arts and working with children gave her the best of both worlds. She then reached out to her current advisor (dental hygiene), who connected her with an advisor in the education program. In her words: "Everybody was welcoming and could express to me what's required. So, it was a pretty smooth transition." Makayla was redirected and back on track to fulfilling her commitment to completing her degree.

When he first enrolled, Marques expressed his desire to major in Orthopedics but later changed his major several times. "Initially, it was Entrepreneurship. Then I changed it to Information Systems, which is like Business and Information Systems mixed. Then I went into IT (Information Technology), and I believe I switched back to Information Systems (IS).

Breasia: In the Spring of 2011, Breasia enrolled full-time at Georgia Military College (GMC) as a Pre-Nursing major. Breasia no longer wanted to become a nurse after having children and decided to change schools to become a teacher. She enrolled at Brunel University to study Early Childhood Education, "I don't want to do nursing anymore. I wanted to become a teacher and did that for a little bit and decided, no, I don't want to be a teacher. I want to be a nurse." She attended Brunel University for a short time and switched her degree plans back to nursing. Breasia re-enrolled at Georgia Military College to continue her pursuit of a nursing degree. Breasia completed her associate's degree in nursing at Georgia Military College after many years. When asked about her academic journey and her major decisions. She revealed:

> I started and stopped school a lot. I did not have a direction. I was just going to school, all while being a mom. I was more so just cashing in my credits. I said I had been going to school long enough. I need a degree to just say I did something. It was in pre-nursing, even though I had no intentions whatsoever of becoming a nurse.

Breasia had no interest in becoming a nurse but decided to stay in the medical field. She became a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and got a job at Augusta University Children's Hospital. She was employed there for two years before she enrolled in Augusta University's Pre-Clinical Laboratory Science program to become a Laboratory Technician. Having worked with children for some time at the hospital, Breasia transitioned to working with adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. She experienced a significant number of patients dying and oversaw preparing their bodies, "A lot of patients passed on their own, and it really broke my heart that they were alone. I got to be the last person they were with. I got to prepare them for being picked up for the funeral home; it was more so being able to show respect, but it was hard." Breasia decided to pursue her own funeral home business. In the Spring of 2020. She enrolled at Gupton-

Jones College of Funeral Services. Breasia found the job and academic work too depressing and stopped attending after two semesters. She shared:

> I've struggled a lot with depression and everything. That career was too depressing for me. I didn't have any direction in life. I didn't know what I wanted to do. School is still important to me. Education is always important to me because I have goals. I wanted a degree. I just didn't know what I wanted to get a degree in.

Breasia left the hospital after six years and opened her own cleaning business. Feeling the need to learn more about the business side, in the Spring of 2021, she started at Augusta University as a Business major.

Kendrick changed his major from music education to Political Science with a concentration in pre-law during his first semester at Augusta University. He was discouraged from progressing as a music major due to his negative interaction with a faculty member during orientation. At the University of Arizona Global, he majored in Business Management. When he reenrolled at Augusta University in fall 2023, he changed his major to Sociology.

## Summary

This chapter provided in-depth profiles of eight Black participants, six females and two males, who identified as Black or African American and experienced stop out and return behavior for 4-year public institutions. This study explored each participant's journey from high school through their college stop out and then re-enrollment into the same or different institutions and programs of study. Two students described the experience of transitioning to college as positive. Five students gave a detailed account describing their dissatisfaction with the preparation they received from their respective high schools located in urban areas. They spoke of the high school's limited resources, which contributed to their inability to make informed

decisions regarding choosing their dream college, preferred major, or properly preparing for SATs. Two students discussed not knowing other options available to them after high school. These students expressed the pressure they experienced to attend college instead of being able to take a gap year or attend a community college first, which impacted their ability to enroll in the college of their choice.

Familial relationships played an instrumental role in two students who experienced pregnancies early in their academic journey, which delayed their ability to continue their studies to obtain a bachelor's degree. Three students received associate's degrees. Two students received their associate's degree after leaving their 4-year institution; the other obtained it when they were enrolled. The students talked at length about their need to work while attending college. This was a dominant theme. Six students worked full-time hours while enrolled at the university before leaving college. One student expressed their need to work due to the cost associated with taking the standardized tests affiliated with her program of study, books, and other incidentals related to the cost of attendance. Two students described the need to work as expectant mothers. One student worked to afford room and board, and another worked due to her motivation to continue college and her desire to make money to support her partying. One student expressed the desire to work full-time in his family business. Changing majors, constantly changing institutions, academic suspension, and low grades significantly affected all but one student's leaving the institution.

Most students expressed that they utilized academic resources at least once before deciding to leave college but found that it proved problematic when they did use them. Six students turned to family members or a staff member, a success coach, or an academic advisor for guidance when deciding to leave college. Three students sought guidance from a campus

partner, department advisor, and admissions/financial aid staff during the re-enrollment process. Three students consulted with family members, and two students did not seek anyone's guidance during their re-enrollment process. Two students directly attributed their decision to return to college due to the lack of job advancement.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more. The subsequent sections will align the major themes to student attrition, persistence, and critical race theories. This study applied Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and critical race theory to explore the experiences of Black students who decided to stop out and return to complete their degrees. These theories were used to understand the reasons and influences for their departure and return at various points in their academic journey.

This chapter summarizes the participants' lived experiences to answer the three research questions: What experiences contributed to the student's withdrawal from the institution? What experiences contributed to the student's return to the institution? What retention strategies and programs were used during the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes? I will discuss the implications for higher education administrators to enhance/provide services and programs needed to help retain Black or African American students who persist to graduation. I will share ways to enhance this research and make recommendations.

**Student Departure Theory**

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure described three stages or rites of passage—separatism, transition, and incorporation—to explain how individuals socially adapt to new environments as they progress from membership in one group to another (Palmer et al., 2010, pp. 577–597). Tinto's theory is based on Van Gennep's (1961) study entitled "Rites of Passage," which is directly related to the process of student departure and the individual movement from one group to another, from youth to adult status in society (Tinto, 1993, p. 92). According to Tinto, individuals enter higher education institutions with a range of differing family and community backgrounds, a variety of personal attributes, skills, financial resources, dispositions, and varying types of pre-college educational experiences and achievements. Students do not leave college for one reason, often for multiple reasons.

Tinto (1993) noted that departures often appear for students of color as they face greater problems in meeting academic demands, establishing their social or intellectual niche on campus, and obtaining sufficient financial resources. Participants shared their experiences related to the competing priorities, lack of resources, lack of support, and academic challenges that led to their stop-out and return to the institution. The finding revealed three major themes that contributed to their stop-out and decision to return: insufficient college preparation, lack of knowledge regarding options available after high school, and minimum support before stopping out. In the first research question, how do Black students describe the experiences that lead to their decision to withdraw from the institutions considering the students' separation from their environments, transition to college, and integration into their respective institutions?

**Separation**

Separation is the first stage of Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure. Tinto (1993) explained that separation required individuals to disassociate themselves, by varying degrees, from past community memberships, those most associated with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence. Tinto emphasized that students experienced disassociation differently based on whether they moved away to attend college or stayed at home. Separation in both instances could be extremely stressful, but maybe more so for students who move away as they must become fully embedded in campus life. The findings revealed that most participants found separating from their communities challenging physically or due to specific behaviors. Marques and Shantel attended colleges around two hours away from their homes. Marques initially adjusted well to college life at Georgia Southern University as he balanced his academics with joining the football team. His priorities shifted when he began to commute home to Augusta to work in his family business, leading him to transfer to Augusta University. At Augusta University, Marques began playing sports, joining a fraternity, and working more at his family business. The more Marques worked at the family business, the more he questioned the value of a college education.

Shantel was a first-generation college student and only attended Indiana University Kokomo because she had received a scholarship. She had never been away from her family for an extended time. Shantel experienced financial struggles in her first semester due to a lack of transportation and her inability to afford off-campus housing. She transferred to Indiana University South Bend to be closer to her father. Once at the new school, her family dynamics disrupted her ability to persist. Shantel was forced to get a job to pay her rent to her father and stepmother and buy a reliable car. Working an overnight job interfered with her ability to do well

in her classes, causing her grades to decline and eventually leaving college. The process leading to the adoption of behaviors and norms appropriate to the college life requires some degree of transformation and rejection of past communities' norms (Tinto, 1993).

Kendrick admitted to being "too personable" in high school, leading to not having the best grades. He had plans to attend Coastal Carolina University for music education but could not attend because his mother would not allow him to retake the SAT to achieve a higher score. Kendrick felt his aspirations to go away to college were thwarted by his parent's desire for him to attend Augusta University with his twin brother.

At Augusta University, Kendrick fell into the same behaviors as in high school, like not doing homework and thinking he could get by on his charm. Talisha lived at home and attended the local university, Purdue University Northwest. She was not accustomed to making decisions independently when she entered college. Talisha struggled to manage her time between classes due to the increased pressure to fit in with her friends. She began to miss classes, which caused her to receive bad grades purposely. To support her party lifestyle on campus, she got a waitress job, which led to her becoming uninterested in attending college, causing her to leave.

**Transition**

Transition is the second stage of Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure. It is characterized as a period of passage between the old and the new norms and patterns, between associations of the past and hoped-for associations with present communities. In this stage, students experience great stress, confusion, and difficulties adjusting to the academic and social environment of college life. The findings revealed that the participants found the transitions from high school to college especially challenging. Alicia and Breasia discovered early in their academic journey that they were expecting a child. They both shared that they had little to no

support while in school. Alicia explained, "I did not have any support. I was the first to graduate. First-generation. I did it all by myself." As a first-generation college student, she found it difficult to navigate paying for college supporting herself and a new baby, "There were many nights that I sat up and I cried, and I would try not to let my baby see me cry." She relied on her financial aid to support her growing family, "Being that young and having a child, I was blessed to be able to get anything back." Alicia was forced to leave for three years without earning her bachelor's degree from Purdue Northwest. She decided it was best that she go to work full-time to get some experience to put on her resume. Alicia gave the impression that she was committed to completing her degree even though she was a first-generation college student and a parent.

Breasia was not fully committed to the idea of going to college. In her senior year, she took a tour of Augusta University. This is when she first began to entertain the idea of attending college. Breasia did not attend college immediately; she took a semester off after graduating high school. When she finally enrolled, she said, "I was just going to college because that was the thing to do." Breasia discovered she was expecting her first child a month into the semester. After the birth of her daughter, she got married, bought a house, had a second child, and dropped out of college. Breasia was never committed to completing college, "I kind of really didn't have any direction in life. I didn't know what I wanted to do." Breasia's degree and career decisions were based on what was going on in her life then. Her integration into any college she attended was short-lived. Of all the participants interviewed, Breasia experienced the most challenges in coping with her stressful situations, and it all stemmed from her lack of support during high school. She disclosed, "I didn't have much to look forward to, so that was rough."

**Integration**

Incorporation is the last stage of Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure. In this stage Tinto's model emphasized that having moved away from the past norms and behavioral patterns, the individuals now face the problem of finding and adopting new norms appropriate to the new college setting and establishing competent membership in the academic and social environments of college life (1993,). The findings revealed that some participants could truly integrate into the college environment. Lashawn excelled academically and socially during her time at East Georgia, "I was already super eager to learn new things, and studying was high on my list. I was not attending college as a party student, so the first semester was pretty good." She became a student ambassador and built a phenomenal relationship with the staff, faculty, and the president. After receiving her associate degree, she transferred to Augusta University, where she did not find the same level of support. Lashawn's waning dedication to her education due to her difficult transition, coupled with her increased work schedule, proved too much to maintain her grades, leaving her suspended from Augusta University. She was immediately reinstated the following semester when the university began to experience the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. "I got back on track, suddenly COVID hit. At that point, my academic education had fallen because of Covid, but my actual career in marketing skyrocketed." Lashawn left college and began working full-time at a marketing firm.

Tinto (1993) found that some institutions provide a variety of formal and informal mechanisms to help students become connected to their college environment. "These mechanisms may serve to provide individuals with opportunities to establish repetitive contact with other members of the institutions in circumstances which lead to the possibility of integration, including fraternities, sororities, student dormitory associations, student unions,

frequent faculty and visiting scholar series, extracurricular programs, and intramural athletics." (1988, p. 446). Overinvolvement in social spaces can also lead to student departure. Marques tried out for football during his sophomore year at Georgia Southern. He admitted:

> It was a totally different experience in itself, going from morning practice to class to evening video to workouts to class to practice all day. I have the utmost respect for college athletes. I really do because in the little time that I did have, I was like, man, I don't see how people do it. I really don't.

After some time, he gave up football and transferred to Augusta University to spend more time working in the family business. At AU, Marques integrated into the environment by joining multiple sports teams and a fraternity. He said, "I turned to Greek Life and tried track for a bit. I didn't do events, but I was trying to make the team [to] do shotput and javelin for a time. Then my dad was like, "No, you are not doing that. You have to stay focused." Marques discussed how joining the fraternity served as a distraction from his studies.

Lashawn and Marques could integrate into the academic and social environment by participating in sports or joining student organizations. Lashawn excelled at East Georgia State College as she was heavily involved as an ambassador and built a relationship with the staff. This connection was not replicated once she transferred to Augusta University. Marques was overinvolved in sports and fraternity at Georgia Southern and Augusta University. Both students took different paths that ended in them stopping out.

## Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) in education challenges the traditional claims of the educational system and its institutions to objectivity, meritocracy, color and gender blindness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). This study used a

critical race framework to examine whether race, ethnicity, and gender contributed to the students stopping out or returning to college. According to Hernandez-Reyes (2023):

> Students of color often experience college differently than their White peers because of the negative attitudes, behavior, and practices some peers and faculty have toward students of color due to their race and/or ethnicity. The long-term effects of college students' experiences on campus severely affect the academic experiences and social well-being of students of color, namely — their college access and success. (para. 2)

These negative experiences come in the form of microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group and are identified by three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). The students in the student shared how microinvalidations contributed to their persistence difficulties.

**Microinvalidations**

Black students are often the targets of microaggressions and discrimination, and they may feel like they do not belong, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression (Prempeh & Freeman, 2023). The students shared their experiences related to their race, ethnicity, and gender before stopping out rather than returning to college. They spoke of how forms of microaggression, namely microinvalidation, impacted their college persistence. Microinvalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color (Sue et al., 2007). Not only were participants oppressed by not having the resources needed to succeed in college, but they also mentioned their experiences related to what they perceived as hostile situations. For

Black students, these hostile situations produce psychological stress responses may include

frustration, anger, resentment, or fear commonly, referred to as racial battle fatigue (Franklin,

2016; Smith, 2004). Racial battle fatigue was present in the participants' coping skills and

language.

Alicia and Kendrick spoke specifically to instances of microinvalidations. Alicia

explained an unnerving experience she once had involving a guest speaker in one of her core

classes. She said:

> In a Communication 101 class, a guest speaker said to the class, "90% of you will not
>
> graduate from here, and 5% of you will quit. If you do graduate, you will graduate with
>
> something stupid." Alicia would be determined from that moment to prove that professor
>
> wrong. She said, "If I could find him, I would say, you don't know who you are talking
>
> to, you don't know where I come from, and I will graduate. I promised myself that
>
> I would graduate, even if it were with a minor degree. I would graduate to support
>
> myself.

For academic advising with postsecondary students, CRT serves as a theoretical

framework to understand how advising interactions and practices with students of color offer

help or exert harm (Lee, 2018). Kendrick shared how his assigned academic advisor made him

feel unwelcome at his first meeting to plan his courses for the next semester. He expressed:

> Even my advisor was Black but didn't give a fuck. She didn't care. I came in and sat
>
> down. I went to tell her my name, but she stopped me and said, "I can see it on the
>
> computer screen." I sat down and just sat back, and she was like, "I got you down for this
>
> this, this, this." You want to change any of them? She said, I guess not!" She said, "Well,
>
> this is what you got this semester," and I said alright. Signed the form and I just walked

out. "Maybe they're meeting a lot of people, but this is a small university, and everybody has a time slot. If you do not care about me, you do not have to care about me but this little 20 minutes you do."

Kendrick did not understand why his advisor would act this way toward him. He knew she probably had a large caseload, but he felt that in the 20 minutes that were allotted to him, she should have been more caring and concerned about his well-being. In his first experience at Augusta University, during orientation, he was asked to leave his group to take a music test which resulted in him changing his major. He shared:

This was not an easy test. Ten minutes for I think was six pages front and back. I didn't have a pencil for the first three minutes, and he left the clock running. I'm just sitting there. I don't have anything to write. I've gotta go knock on the door. He's still in there chopping it up with the girl, she's on the piano now. I don't have a pencil, and he finally comes, and it's like "I'll get you a pencil. It just wouldn't be fair if I restarted the time because you've had a chance to look at the test." "Yeah, but I couldn't write." He was like, "You didn't get anywhere as far as I thought you would have. This isn't a very difficult test, so we're going to start you off in remedial music." I said, "I ain't never been remedial SHIT! I will just change majors." He said, "We start a lot of musicians off in remedial" I said, "I'm not 'a lot of them' and I'm not doing remedial music class."

## Race and Gender

Social support, cultural pride, the sense of belonging that comes from interacting with others with a similar cultural background, and resources on campus designed to assist students of color in adapting to the campus environment can make a positive difference in their adjustment and emotional well-being (Primm, 2018). How their race intersects with their decision to leave

college. Participants shared how external factors related to being Black contributed to their commitment to completing their degree. Talisha expressed the biggest hindrance that African Americans face trying to fit in with others and their love of partying. She stated:

> I would say African American people. Black people love to party, hang out, and socialize. I feel like that was my biggest hindrance because I was trying to fit in, hang out, and live a college lifestyle. I see everyone discussing sorority and fraternity parties. I am just trying to fit in with the crowd.

Students with high financial stress may not have the same external resources (e.g., family, friends) to rely upon in emergencies and, therefore, may feel forced to leave college to take care of immediate needs (Britt et al., 2017). Alicia detailed how her race contributed to her lack of financial knowledge and prevented her from receiving adequate funding to persist. She said:

> Race is a huge thing that played in favor of me not being able to get some help but, at the same time, receiving assistance financially because it was there. It is just that I did not know how to go about getting it and no one told me how. I only knew of Pell Grants and student loans.

The students explained how their race, ethnicity, or gender intersected with their decision to leave school. Breasia contributed her gender as a reason why she stopped attending school. She shared:

> Being a woman contributed to it because, as a woman, you have to do everything. You must raise the children, especially work, take care of the children, and run your household. As a woman, I felt I had more responsibility, and because of those

responsibilities, I felt I didn't have time for school. However, I was wrong. It just meant I needed to work harder.

Contributing factors were related to the Black culture, financial distress, raising children, insufficient pre-collegiate preparation, and limited high school resources.

**Connection With Faculty Members**

Black students who reported more caring student–faculty interactions, a greater sense of cultural fit, and a stronger racial identity were more academically and socially engaged on campus (Beasley, 2021). Cody (2017) suggested that the impact of cultural trauma and mistrust may become evident in settings and situations in which Black Americans are confronted with white privilege or whiteness. Participants discussed how the student–faculty experience induced distrust and a feeling of not being supported. Kendrick intensely reflected on his distrust of White professors:

> You get taught early. Don't talk to white people like that; don't talk to your white professor. Especially in this area, they will teach you to shuck and jive; it is ingrained in this area to be subservient and stay out of the way. Fair is supposed to be fair all the time and they could talk to me like this, and I should be able to talk to them like that if they're being fair with me and they're not. You're lucky to be here, is the vibe I've got a lot of time in class. It's like, don't ask me to help you do more or less. Don't ask me to do anything for you because you are lucky to be here. You could be up the road at Paine College. It really felt like that all the time. It's like plenty of Black kids at Paine. You could have just gone over there if you had such a problem with my teaching style.
>
> Shantel described an encounter with a white professor when she attended Indiana

University South Bend that left her feeling unsupported.

We both went to tutoring at separate times. She had a tough time with tutoring, and then I

would go to my professor like I've done all these steps you said to go through for help,

now I'm coming to you. She would just get such an attitude that she had to help me, and

so that just sort of, like, if you make me feel like a burden, you have to worry about me.

I'm going to step back. That was just a big factor in me stepping back, and I did not feel

supported.

Demonstrating caring attitudes in student–faculty interactions may increase students'

willingness to engage with faculty and enhance their academic and social performance (Beasley,

2021). The students in this study were not engaged with faculty inside or outside the classroom.

They often found it difficult to connect with their professors due to their own bias or the

professors' unwelcoming actions.

While addressing the research questions using Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure

and Delgado et al.'s (2017) critical race theory, I discovered the narratives were deeply

connected to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). In interpreting Freire's pedagogy,

McInerney (2009) insisted,

If we deny subjectivity, silence student voices, show scant respect for children and their

culture, suppress the creative capabilities of individuals, and close down spaces for

inquiry, we are likely to reinforce existing patterns of alienation and disaffection amongst

young people. (p. 28)

Several participants expressed how their respective high schools lacked the resources

necessary to allow them to be successful in college. The study participants displayed vibrant

circumstances of the haves and the have-nots. Marx et al. (2012) described this as a capitalist

system that concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a small minority (haves), creates huge

pools of poverty (have-nots), turns life into a daily grind that prevents most people from fulfilling their potential, and results in frequent and enormously wasteful economic crises. High schools with large concentrations of students of color often have fewer resources.

Spatig-Amerikaner (2012) stated, "Students of color are often concentrated in schools with fewer resources. Schools with 90 percent or more students of color spend $733 less per student per year than schools with 90 percent or more white students." Makayla acknowledged that although her transition into college went well, she could have been better prepared for the right program of study before enrolling. She said:

> I'm not realizing. There were a lot of basic things that I didn't know about college. There were a lot of problem-solving skills that I didn't understand until college, and by that time, I was kind of struggling. I was making it, but because I believed I was in an area where it was predominately Black, I think the resources weren't as advanced as the other communities. I hate to say it, but as a teacher, you see a lot of non-minorities as teachers, and I think the main reason is because we grow up in a community where our resources are limited versus the ones who have all these resources and privilege, and all these things. It's a little bit easier because they're better equipped. I think I wasn't as equipped as a Black student growing up as the other communities.

Lashawn expressed how the urban school she attended left her unprepared to get admitted into her first-choice college. She stated,

> We weren't fortunate enough to go to one of those higher education schools where you have teachers there. That some of the teachers there weren't all into it, but I mean, the school had a reputation for not being the best school. I mean, you can't help that.

Lashawn attended Augusta Technical College after graduating high school as she felt inadequately prepared to attend the school of her choice, Augusta University. She stated, "My school reputation really didn't prepare us to understand what the GPA the mindset of what's next, which is college. But how do you get there with the right grades? We weren't educated on the whole GPA aspect and SATs."

In these instances, the participants were made to feel that their failure to perform well in college or obtain the appropriate knowledge needed to gain admission to the college of their choice was a significant flaw brought on by themselves. Freire(1970) described this oppressor ideology as the "absolutizing of ignorance, in which the words of his own class come to be the 'true words,' which he imposes or attempts to impose on the others: the oppressed, whose words have been stolen from them" (p. 129). Absolutizing ignorance causes the oppressed to develop extreme doubt in their abilities as they ponder their competency. The participants were not provided with the same level of support and resources as students at well-equipped high schools, which may have affected their experience.

> From how we finance public schools to how we assign our children to them, the prevailing structure of traditional public education is inexorably tilted against Black and brown students. The form and function of our traditional public school systems are a direct reflection of historical political power dynamics produced by racial and economic inequity. (El-Mekki, 2023)

## Summary

This chapter narrated the lived experiences of the Black participants' decisions to stop out and return to complete their degree, using Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Delgado et al.'s (2017) critical race theory. These theories were used to understand the reasons

and influences for their departure at various points. The students connected their departure to the lack of separation, transition, and integration. Most of the participants revealed that separating from their communities was physically challenging or due to specific behaviors. Transition to college was difficult because they were unable to balance their personal lives with the academic and social environments, which caused them substantial stress and confusion.

Some participants spoke of how microaggressions and microinvalidations impacted their college persistence. They were made to feel like they did not belong in college and experienced feelings of isolation, anxiety, and, at times, depression. External factors contributed to their departure and inability to return, such as the lack of resources in their respective urban high schools, which contributed to their failure to pursue the major or college of their choice. The absence of Black faculty induced institutional distrust, a lack of feeling supported, and inadequate financial stability.

CHAPTER SEVEN


IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop-out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away from college for one year or more. The scope of this research on student attrition has brought awareness of the importance of Black college students' retention and persistence. The increased literature on student attrition behavior by scholars is helpful in bringing understanding to why higher education institutions are experiencing a decline in enrollment and their inability to retain their student body. The findings imply that college administrators must implement improved strategies to reduce Black student attrition and find more effective solutions to acclimate them to their campuses.

The findings of the first research question, How Black students described their reasons that led to their decision to withdraw?, showed that Black students had difficulty transitioning to college due to their high schools' lack of resources, the level of support received from their high school counselors or family members when deciding on a college to attend, lack of options on what type of institutions to attend and the lack of preparation for the rigors of college. Stressors and barriers to completion, such as poor academic and social adjustment to the campus environment, influenced students to leave college. Some students experienced setbacks due to their low GPA, leading to academic probation and suspension issues. Students had few to no

connections with faculty, staff or support services. Two female students experienced setbacks due to pregnancy, and others experienced relational and familial issues. Working off campus was a substantial reason for the students leaving college, as all but one student worked more than 40 hours per week, which interfered with their ability to connect properly with their academic journey.

The finding of the second research question, How do Black students describe the experiences that contributed to their return to institutions?, showed three students who explained that a lack of advancement in their respective jobs contributed to why they chose to re-enroll. Others suggested that their family members encouraged and served as inspiration when they decided to return to college. The findings of the third research question, What retention strategies and programs were used during the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes?, included only two Black students who discussed using a formal process to reenroll back into the college. Most found re-enrolling a challenge as no formal process was established.

This study examines the retention experiences of Black students at public higher education institutions. The findings imply that college administrators still need to implement improved strategies to reduce Black student attrition and find more effective solutions to acclimate them to their campuses. Simply prioritizing the enrollment of the largest number of first-time, full-time students each year in any given year is not enough. Implementing a comprehensive approach includes recruiting new students, retaining current students, and re-engaging students who have some college but no degree to achieve the desired outcomes in higher education. For Black students, this approach must begin at the K-12 level. Participants in this study described their high schools as being under-resourced, leaving them unprepared for the rigors of college causing them to stop out before obtaining their degree.

Some participants acknowledged that they came from high schools which did not properly prepare them for the rigors of coursework or thoroughly explain the financial process. Breasia and Lashawn said they came from high schools that did not properly prepare them for college life rigors or have sufficient resources to transition successfully to their college of choice. Makayla and Shantel received scholarships to attend college but struggled with insufficient knowledge about the out-of-pocket expenses along with the cost of attendance. Talisha and Shantel had only applied to one college. Kendrick and Lashawn aspired to attend different colleges after graduation, but due to lower SAT scores, they had to take a different route, which proved beneficial for Lashawn and problematic for Kendrick.

The current funding structure of K-12 schools results in widening the achievement and wage gap experienced by Black families. The rampant inequitable funding of public K–12 schools, in which non-White school districts received $23 billion less than White school districts even though they served the same number of students, must be addressed (EdBuild, 2019; Jackson & Ramirez-Mendoza, 2020). Unfortunately, Black students are concentrated at under-resourced K–12 schools that are less likely to have college-prep courses and that are more likely to have less qualified teachers who have lower expectations of students (United Negro College Fund). As noted by the participants in this study, "Black students attending colleges that are unable to provide the financial aid they need are often forced to take on more debt, stop out of college to work, or try to work additional hours while enrolled (Jones & Nichols, 2020, p. 7; Walizer, 2018). Higher education institutions need to do more to improve their practices to address the lack of support, negative staff interactions, limited interventions Black students experience while on their campuses.

The participants' familial relationships and background provided encouragement and the foundation needed to help them successfully transition into college, but not enough to help them stay enrolled. Irlbeck et al. (2014) found that students struggle with the transitions into university life because of their lack of knowledge about this new environment, and some students do not have the support systems needed to succeed. Four participants came from two-parent households with either one or both parents possessing a college degree. Their education was funded by their parents, or they received a form of scholarship. When contemplating their return to college, all the students stated they no longer could rely on their parents to pay for their education. Alicia and Breasia experienced pregnancy early into their academic journey, which made acclimating to the college environment strenuous and contributed to their leaving college. It also contributed to their return to college to complete their degrees.

The third implication is to ensure faculty and staff intentionally build positive relationships with students of color in and outside the classroom. Lack of connection with faculty and staff contributed to the student's stop-out decision and, for some students, made it difficult to return to college. Participants spoke of their interactions with faculty as positive when it benefited them. When Talisha missed assignments and needed to improve her grade, she would ask her professors, who she thought were interested in her well-being, to ask for an extension. Shantel was forced to speak with her academic coach due to her declining grades but felt no one at the school understood the difficulties she was experiencing in her home life. African American males were less likely to meet with faculty members or have contact with them outside the classroom, were bored in class, and were less likely to participate in campus activities, highlighted by Bush and Lawson Bush (2010). This perception was congruent with Kendrick's experience as he struggled to connect with professors as he thought they were dismissive of him

because he was Black. Marques considered himself a reserved person and preferred to meet with faculty individually versus in the classroom in front of his peers. The female participants discussed their inability to connect with professors and staff members, leading them to leave college.

The participants appeared to have strained or non-existent relationships with their academic advisors, contributing to their diminished commitment to completing their degrees. The underlying assumption for encouraging interactions between advisers and students is that such relationships will culminate in the successful completion of the academic program, leading to commencement and awarding of the degree (Yarborough, 2002). Alicia reflected on her experience with her advisor, which made her indecisive about her choice of major. Shantel found her advisor at IU Kokomo and academic coach helpful, but it was not enough to keep her enrolled. Kendrick expressed in detail the feeling of rejection by his advisor at Augusta University, which led him to feel unmotivated and discouraged. Makayla frequently interacted with her advisors when deciding to change her major but found it difficult to connect with them upon returning to the institution.

The fourth implication is encouraging Black students to connect with the appropriate resources before the first sign of academic difficulty. Lack of readiness for college places students at risk of failing courses and dropping out of college, temporarily or permanently, during their first year of enrollment; students who return also do not have the skills needed to navigate the educational landscape effectively (Horton, 2015, p. 83). All participants discussed how they did not seek assistance from academic support offices during their course challenges or sought assistance at least once. Talisha sought help when she needed to recover her GPA. When she struggled to maintain her grades, Shantel went to see her academic coach but reached out too

late in the semester to recover, which influenced her decision to leave without properly

withdrawing. Makayla contacted her advisor to explore ways to maintain her scholarship when

she changed her major to education but was not satisfied with the responses given to remain in

school. Alicia attempted to reach out to various campus constituents but was met with ambiguity

and a lack of care. Kendrick, Marques, Lashawn, and Breasia navigated their difficulties

independently.

The fifth implication is to ensure Black students can afford to attend the colleges they are

being accepted into without sacrificing their experience by working full-time hours, which takes

away the time spent on academics or engaging in campus activities. Kulm and Cramer's (2006)

study on student employment suggested the extent of employment affects time spent studying

outside the classroom, difficulty finding time to do required assignments, and managing the time

needed to connect with peers and faculty, leading to a student dropping out. Talisha and

Marques's parents provided financial assistance to attend college and neither student was

required to find employment to remain in college. Talisha became discouraged after two years

and chose to work full-time as a waitress/bartender to support her party lifestyle. Marques began

working at his family's water supply business, making him question the value of an education.

Lashawn lived with her parents and relied on financial aid to pay for college, but she worked to

establish some independence from them. Other participants found it necessary to work full-time

while in college.

Shantel was forced to work full-time at Walmart, the overnight shift, while in school to

pay for her room and board while living with her father and stepmother. Makayla worked to

afford incidentals not covered by her scholarship and to afford to retake the assessment test

required as an education major. Alicia and Breasia worked full-time because they had children they needed to care for while attending college.

The sixth implication is to ensure that Black students minimize the amount of debt they accumulate before their stop out or graduation. Finances are the primary reason why most students stop out. This is particularly true of Black women as they enroll in college at higher rates than Black men. The high cost of college is particularly burdensome for Black women, who because of structural racism and sexism, have fewer financial resources to pay for a higher education and little choice but to borrow higher amounts (Jackson & Williams, 2022; Struyven et al, 2021). Their financial challenges were critically important in their movement through college. Black families have less wealth and lower earnings, Black borrowers, and Black women are less likely to receive financial support from family or friends to help cover the cost of college or student debt (Jackson & Williams, 2022, p. 5). Shantel was forced to work full-time at Walmart, the overnight shift, while in school to pay for her room and board while living with her father and stepmother.

Black women not only have to contend with structural barriers but also are more likely to be student parents, which makes it difficult to repay their student loans, or any debt (Jackson & Williams, 2022). Alicia and Breasia worked full-time because they had children early in their academic journey, which delayed their progression in college. Black college students are the most likely to be parents (33 percent), and Black women; two in five of whom are mothers, are more likely than women from other backgrounds to be raising children while in college (Cruse et. al., 2019). The Black women in the study experienced a significant monetary barrier while pursuing their degrees. Makayla worked to pay for incidentals not covered by her scholarship, such as books and transportation costs, and to retake the assessment tests required as an

education major. She paid to retake the CASA test seven times without much success before leaving college. While Talisha was eager to reenroll to complete her degree, she had learned she was unable to return to complete her studies due to a past due bill which prohibited her from obtaining her official transcripts. Regardless of the barriers and challenges Black women face while attending college, "Black women are still pursuing a higher education because they can't afford not to: To achieve their academic and professional goals and improve the financial situation of their families, they need a degree (if not two or three)" (Jackson & Williams, 2022, p. 5), in spite of the rising cost associated with pursuing a degree.

## Recommendations

This study examines the retention experiences of Black students at public higher education institutions. Based upon the findings of this study, I offer recommendations for action that will enhance Black students' collegiate experiences to remain in college to obtain a degree. These recommendations include enhancing but not limiting Black students' interactions with academic advisors, connecting them to mentoring and academic coaching immediately upon entry into college, increasing the hiring of Black faculty and staff, and implementing cultural competency training for university employees. This section also includes recommendations from the study participants.

### Student Recommendations to Administrators

Each participant was asked 12 questions to facilitate discussion relevant to their stop out and return behavior. In the final questions, each participant was asked, "What suggestions would you give administrators in regard to helping students stay and graduate from the university?" Three participants' advice involved providing more opportunities for "checking in" on students: "Checking in on students could help students feel connected"; Check in and follow up on student

mental health and conduct discussion groups"; and "Creating a check in program. Notice the patterns of someone enrolling and stopping out of school." Two participants requested that administrators and faculty pay more attention or be aware of student struggles: "Be aware if a student is struggling or unable to pass a step or milestone"; and "Pay attention to the quiet ones, those not participating in class. They won't ask for help." The remaining participants requested administrators to "Be available and accessible. Let students know you are available," and "In a sense, be a social worker for students. To receive support from advisors," and lastly, "Go out and talk to students regardless of your status (i.e., professor, doctor) and spend time walking around getting to know students. Asking if everything is ok, alright. It's alright to 'baby' the students. They need to feel like you care about them."

**Academic Advisement**

Academic advising is vital to the success of students before and during college. Done poorly, it can contribute to the reasons why students leave. Academic advisors help connect students to campus resources that can enrich their educational experiences, assist them in overcoming problems, and help them understand the connections between their educational activities and their long-term goals (Fosnacht et al., 2017). Academic advising goes beyond picking out classes and building a class schedule. It involves connecting students to resources and helping them build the necessary relationships with faculty and peers to become well-rounded, productive global citizens.

Good academic advising also provides perhaps the only opportunity for all students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them (Drake, 2011, p. 10). The participants shared their negative experiences when meeting with their academic advisors. They explained how their academic advisors lacked care during regularly

scheduled meetings when dealing with academic issues such as probation or suspension or questions concerning changing majors. Kendrick, a Black male, expressed his advisor's dismissive behavior during meetings, and her lack of acknowledgment led to anger and distrust. Johnson et al., (2023) study found Black male collegians benefited from support and encouragement from a multitude of individuals, including formal advisors and informal advisors such as peers, administrators, and other campus staff members. In addition to hiring student-centered individuals, continuous advisor training is likely needed to help advisors work with diverse student populations. As colleges and universities face mounting pressures to increase completion rates and shorten the time to degree, improving the reach and effectiveness of advising systems proves important in leveraging persistence (Fosnacht et al., 2017), especially for Black students.

**Mentoring and Coaching**

The second recommendation would be to connect Black students with mentors or academic coaches immediately upon entry into the university. This intervention strategy will allow Black students to build self-efficacy, commit to completion, and establish a support network. Mentoring programs are useful in reducing alienation, granting greater access to informal social networks, and improving academic achievement and retention rates for underrepresented populations at PWIs (Smith, 2009). Academic coaching is a contemporary approach to supporting students with diverse needs as they develop academic and communication skills and transition to postsecondary education (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016). However, Alzen et al. (2021) stated, "Coaching focuses on developing skills from a holistic perspective, including the co-construction of students' goals and steps to achieve those goals over a series of frequent meetings during a focused duration of time (p. 542). Lashawn

found her relationship with the East Georgia State College staff to be very beneficial as she became connected to her environment by becoming a student ambassador. She recognized the staff as "family" and maintained this relationship when transferring to Augusta University.

Shantel was encouraged to meet with an academic coach at IUSB. Although this connection was initiated due to her declining grades, she still was about to make an informed decision related to continuing to pursue her degree or leaving. No matter what strategy is used to prevent Black students from leaving the college, the findings of recent studies suggest mentoring has the potential to provide students with consistent support and guidance needed to navigate college (Gardenhire & Cerna, 2016); while coaching is influential in building confidence and contributing to at-risk students' decision to return to the institution (Capstick et al., 2019).

**Hiring Black Faculty/Staff**

The third recommendation requires colleges to hire more Black or African faculty to serve the at-risk populations they are trying to retain. Strayhorn (2008) encouraged predominantly White institutions to formulate and implement aggressive faculty hiring policies to increase the number of Black and historically underrepresented professors on campus. The participants responded to a supplemental question regarding whether they could recall being taught by a Black professor, and none of them could recall ever having that experience. Of all the participants, Shantel was the only student who stated she had a professor of color but could not definitively say they were Black or African American. Hiring more African American faculty, staff, and administrators will not only improve the campus climate for Black students but will increase the chances of them being retained because they have people who look like them and can relate to their experiences on PWIs. This is what Hernandez-Reyes (2023) calls increasing

structural diversity, which refers to the structure of student enrollments and faculty on campus, specifically, racial/ethnic representation within them.

Research supports the concept that increasing the college's structural diversity is an important step toward improving the campus racial climate (Hernandez-Reyes, 2023). As students' social engagement increases, they are more likely to be more connected to peers, faculty, and staff who express concern for their academic performance and may be more willing to aid in achieving their educational goals (Beasley, 2021). Hiring more Black college employees will mean having access to mentoring opportunities and role models, increasing the chances of Black student success.

**Cultural Competence**

The fourth recommendation is for PWIs to require cultural competence training for their faculty, staff, and students. Acknowledging one's privilege can help White individuals improve their understanding of their own biases and appreciate the viewpoints and experiences of people of color, which are important aspects of cultural competence (Robey & Dickter, 2022). Black students are often the targets of microaggressions and discrimination and are made to feel like they do not belong, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression (Prempeh & Freeman, 2023). Alicia and Kendrick described stereotypical instances involving faculty and staff that left them feeling invalidated and disrespected. Incorporating university-wide cultural competence training is an effective strategy that can create a sense of belonging for Black students and make them feel welcomed on campus.

Training for professors across all departments would help to increase discussion and awareness of academic microaggressions to mitigate their prevalence and impacts (McAndrews et al., 2017). Prempeh and Freeman (2023) contended as strategies are employed and

implemented, it is crucial to recognize the significance of understanding the psychology of belonging and how it impacts the self-esteem, self-worth, self-identity, and motivation of Black students to participate and learn actively. "This understanding is imperative in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that promotes their academic success and well-being" (Prempeh & Freeman, 2023, p. 4). It will minimize Black students' distrust and hurt and encourage an understanding environment.

**Retention of Ill-Prepared Students**

The fifth recommendation is that higher education institutions must do more to retain Black students even before admission. Swail (2014) argued that an educational system that fails to prepare many students for higher education and the growing costs of attending college make it more difficult for many students to graduate. Simultaneously, postsecondary institutions need to have a deeper familiarity with the students they attract and register to provide the best possible environment to support student retention and success (Michalski et al., 2017). The participants in the study discussed their high school's lack of resources, which contributed to their lack of preparation for the rigors of college. They explained in detail their pain points related to their negative transition to college and the lack of support they experienced from faculty and staff. Examining admissions practices or increasing collaboration with underserved high schools to ensure Black students are equipped with the necessary skills when entering college will be beneficial. Michalski et al. (2017) stated that academic officials need to ask a critical question, "Does s/he have the potential for scholarly success based on existing academic preparation and ability?" (p. 76). I think regardless of whether the student has the potential or not, if they are admitting these students into their colleges and universities, there is an obligation to ensure they are successful.

**Policy Realignment**

The sixth recommendation is for higher education leaders to evaluate carefully how local, state, and federal policies align with their strategic plans. Rising costs and state budget cuts affect all students and disproportionately threaten affordability and access for Black students (Jones et al., 2020, p. 16). These rising costs will mean that Black student retention will continuously trend at lower rates than their peers. Black students rely heavily on financial aid and scholarships to attend college. Consequently, Pell Grants are awarded to students with very high financial needs, and Black students make up over 58% of the recipients (Institute for College Access and Success, 2020). Although Black enrollment has progressed over the decades, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant has sharply declined (p. 17). Higher education institutions must work smarter to create partnerships that provide more opportunities for Black students to attend their institutions without heavily relying on student loans or full-time employment.

At a high school level, "one of the biggest challenges that must be addressed through college and career readiness reform is the grave disparity in preparation for certain racial and ethnic sub-groups, as well as low-income and first-generation college students (Bryant & Center for Law and Social Policy, 2015, p. 1). Bryant and Center for Law and Social Policy (2015) stated, "To effectively address the issue of college readiness for African American students, schools must reform pre-service training, reduce ratios, and ensure relationships with students and their families are based on trust and high expectations" (p. 13). Preston and Assalone (2017) suggested that one way to do this is for "Educators to ensure they are sending students to institutions of higher education that offer support and safe spaces for low-income students and students of color that thrive academically and socially" (para. 14). Another way is for university representatives provide secondary students with "comprehensive, up-to-date college information

and resources, easily accessible to all students, families, and school personnel, up-to-date college information and resources, easily accessible to all students, families, and school personnel" (McClafferty Jarsky et al., 2009, p. 362). There is a disconnect in disseminating this information to Black students and families in postsecondary schools. Students may receive this information in first-year seminar courses commonly offered at the college or university level.

Lastly, I recommend this information be incorporated into a credit-bearing mandatory college transition course, like dual-enrolled courses, but for all students preparing to attend college while students are still in high school. This course can be taught by university personnel such as graduate assistants, academic advisors, teaching assistants, or retention specialists. Topics covered would include employment, time management, procrastination, test-taking skills, having a growth mindset, the differences between high school and college; the cost of attendance, and the financial aid process. Just as first-year seminars are crucial for Black students' transition to college; it is equally important that students are adequately prepared for college while in high school.

However, it is important to consider reforming the first-year seminars as well. First-year seminars are one area in which student affairs administrators and faculty members might work to assist Black students in adjusting to college life, especially for first-generation college students (Ford & Krechel, 2023, p. 5). These first-year seminars could be used by faculty members to establish counterspaces in the classroom that acknowledge the complexities of Black identity, push back against whiteness, and promote Black students' emotional and genuine viewpoints (Ford & Krechel, 2023; Masta, 2021). Additionally, "first-year seminars could create pathways for Black Students to gain access to mentorship, research opportunities, internship connections,

networking with alumni, organizational leadership, and a host of other opportunists to assist with their development" (Ford & Krechel, 2023, p. 9).

## Limitations

The study of why Black students' stop-out and return behavior has not been widely examined. The results of this study are not without limitations. Although Black or African American students complete college at a lower rate, it proved difficult to obtain equal numbers of female and male participants. This fact, along with the fact this is a phenomenological qualitative study, mean that generalization to all Black or African American students cannot ethically be made. A second limitation is centered on the design of the study. The original design was intended to conduct in-person interviews, but some participants' geographic location, familial obligations, and work schedules required some interviews to take place via Zoom.

## Future Research

As the researcher, regardless of the limitations experienced in this study, further work on Black student attrition and return behavior is needed to help ensure that Black students are retained at the same rate as White students. This future research would focus on interviewing White academic advisors and administrators who work with Black students. Consideration of Black students' experiences with White advisors proves pivotal to the advising of students because many academic advisors at PWIs are White (Kena et al., 2015). When advisors, particularly White advisors, bring little knowledge, experience, or desire to advising interactions, they cannot understand the way racialized experiences may impact Black students or develop helpful relationships with all of their students (Lee, 2018, p. 79). According to Lee (2018), such critical reflection allows advisors to consider their racialized positionality, associated privilege, and the ways these qualities either help or harm their relationships with students. Academic

advising can be used to close the opportunity gap but "to initiate an equity-minded approach to academic advising, institutions must show commitment to the value of academic advising and equity and match this commitment with resources and an institutional culture that supports reflection, innovation, and ownership" (Lawton, 2018; Sprately & Suarez, 2024, p. 16).

In addition, further research should focus on institutions' steps to recruit Black students back to campus to complete their degrees. This would involve taking a four-step approach to recruitment that looks at four critical periods. This approach would examine the following: 1) How institutions track students when a student goes inactive?; 2) What methods are used to recruit students back to the institution?; 3) Evaluating the practices used to prevent Black attrition (i.e., early warning system); 4) The onboarding of students after re-enrollment. It will involve benchmarking the study with peer Academic Advisement Directors for each phase and the role of academic advisement on Black student retention and persistence. Future research should include more Black males that represent varied demographics. The Black males in this study came from two-parent households, with parents with one or more degrees and no financial obligations upon entry into college. Future research should consider diversifying the institution type to include private, public, and HBCUs.

**Conclusion**

Student retention and persistence have been studied abundantly for decades within higher education literature. As colleges and universities face enrollment declines and a demographic shift, they should consider implementing multiple strategies simultaneously to attract students to their institutions to remain in business. The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons contributing to Black or African American students' initial stop-out, the decisions that led them to return to college, and the processes used to facilitate their return to college after being away

from college for one year or more. The research questions aimed to understand what experiences contributed to the student's withdrawal from the institution; what experiences contributed to the students' return to the institution and what retention strategies and programs were used during the withdrawal and re-enrollment processes. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach connecting the theoretical frameworks of Tinto's (1993) model of student departure and Delgado et al.'s (2017) critical race theory to add to the existing literature on stop-out and return behavior of Black and African American students.

This study gave insight into eight participants' lived experiences and produced findings related to their transition to college, the stressors or barriers that led to their stop-out, absent usage of campus resources, internal and external support, employment, re-enrollment process and influences, and lack of job advancement. As a result of this study, what was learned was that the participants discussed how their high school experiences contributed to why they stopped attending college, namely lack of resources, familiarity with financial aid, fragmented family support and lack of commitments. Once on campus the participants detailed the negative or deficient interactions with faculty, staff, and advisors and the experience of feeling like they lacked a sense of belonging and connection to the institution.

The institution's efforts to prevent Black students from stopping out and the processes to facilitate a seamless reenrollment process were inadequate. It is important to avoid placing blame on the participants and recognize the systemic issues within the educational system. The educational system is broken on the K-12 and postsecondary levels, and a cookie-cutter approach, in which the cookie is not chocolate, will not be sufficient to solve this problem. What is known to be true of the K-12 system is that "Contemporary laws facilitate a two-tiered public provision-system whereby Black Americans, on average, experience lower quality public goods

and services than their White counterparts" (Simms, 2023, p. 220). What is needed by higher education institutions is to "establish a culture that reinforces the role of the institution in supporting students beyond academics as a core component of their mission, whether those supports are provided directly or through a partner organization" (Lawton, 2018, p. 38). As of fall 2023, students of color remain more likely to consider stopping out of college citing cost, emotional distress, and mental health reasons as the cause (Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2023).

To improve the retention of Black students, it is recommended to establish academic advising structures that do not allow for "the insidious practices that allows whiteness in education to go unchallenged, positions advisors to either perpetuate or dismantle whiteness in their advising practices" (Sarcedo, 2022, p. 413). Establishing intentional mentoring and hiring Black faculty and staff to help Black students feel connected and supported in the collegiate environment is needed to increase their chances of student success. We must be attentive to the verbal or non-verbal cues from Black students' voices indicating to us to "Check in to help me feel connected," "Follow up on my mental health," or "Be aware, I am struggling." My objective in working in higher education is to champion initiatives that assist students in successfully transitioning to colleges and universities, with the aim of reducing barriers and fostering achievement. When higher education institutions admit students, especially those from Black communities, it is imperative for postsecondary officials to prioritize efforts to cultivate inclusive environments and offer necessary support services to promote their success.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Welcome

2. Appreciation

3. Review consent forms

4. Purpose of study

5. The roles of participants and researcher

6. Goals of the study

1. Tell me about yourself and how did you come to enroll in college?
2. Do you feel like the transition from high school to college influenced your reason to stop attending college?
3. What would you wish you would have known in high school before enrolling at this university?
4. What things do you wish you would have known prior to enrolling in college?
5. Describe your typical routine during the time prior to your stop-out?
6. What type of stressors/barriers have you experienced that led you to stop out?
7. What are some of the resources you utilized on campus? Family support?
8. What type of support did you have prior to your decision to stop out?
9. What was the process (e.g., advising, application) like during reenrollment?
10. How do you think your race, ethnicity, and/or gender caused you to stop out/return to college?

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