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By

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2021

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**FROM REGISTRATION TO GRADUATION: THE PERSISTENCE  
OF BLACK STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT  
AUSTIN**

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**FROM REGISTRATION TO GRADUATION: THE PERSISTENCE  
OF BLACK STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT  
AUSTIN**

by

**DEANNA MICHELLE JOHNSON**

**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2021**

## **Dedication**

To my mom and dad.

Thank you for believing in me and always going beyond the limits.

Everything I am is because of your unconditional love.

## **Acknowledgements**

To my mom, Elsie, I am grateful to God for blessing me with you in my life. Thank you for always being there when I needed someone to listen or just understand what I was going through in life. To my dad, William, thank you for instilling in me the ability to be fearless when things seemed too difficult to conquer. Just hearing both of your voices, during the great and the not-so-great moments, made all the difference and pushed me to keep running towards my dream. To Craig, thank you for being a great big brother and inspiring to me take the road less traveled in education and life. I appreciated all of the road trip adventures whenever I came home as they helped rejuvenate me during this scholastic marathon. To my sister and brother-in-law, Sandra and Bill, thank you both for encouraging me to think beyond my potential. I am truly thankful that we share the joy of having townhall discussions about every issue affecting the world. To Allen, thanks for checking on me whenever days turned into months during this mission to achieve my goal. To my entire Johnson and Fulton families, I thank you all for standing beside me and seeing the finish line even when I could not.

To my committee, I thank you all for staying the course with me as I completed this mission. Collectively, your wisdom and dedication gave me the spirit to keep pressing forward. Dr. Garces, thank you for holding my feet to the fire and keeping me accountable during this process, and Dr. Bukoski, thank you for all of your meditative tips and encouragement to keep swimming. The both of you put in so much of your time and effort and were willing to stay in the boxing ring with me as long as I continued to

fight for my dream. I cannot thank you enough for all your tireless effort and guidance during this process. Dr. Reddick, you have been a true example of what it means to be an exceptional educator, mentor, and researcher. Thank you for giving me opportunities to grow in these areas and reminding me that my research mattered. You are such an inspiration to me, along with many other UT students. Thank you, Dr. Sharpe. It was such an honor to have you with me throughout my entire doctoral journey. I never thought that the first professor I met during orientation would also be the person who signed my defense report form. Your encouragement and calming demeanor helped to see the bigger picture and not the smaller hurdles along the race. Dr. Stephanie Hawley, thank you for being such a wonderful person and leader, who has been such a motivating force in my life.

To Dr. Danielle Alsandor, thank you for carrying the role of best friend and mentor during this journey. Thank you for understanding everything I was going through without me having to say a word; you always called me at just the right time. Jessica Miller-Johnson, thank you for supporting me and stepping-up to help me whenever I needed your wisdom. Your ability to figure things out still amazes me. I am so happy that I went to UT as I would not have met you. Thank you, Melanie Castro, for keeping me spiritually grounded. I thank you for all the notes, cards and books that somehow landed on my desk or I found mysteriously in my folders just when I needed to hear God's words. You have always gone beyond the expected, and I cannot thank you enough for everything you have done to help me. I sincerely thank you, Mickell Bruce, for all of your tough love and reminding me to find my inner-Rocky and keep fighting for my

dream. Thank you for never allowing me to feel defeated and reminding me that people needed to read my research, so this journey was not just about me. To Kimberly Jefferson, thank you for still checking-in on me during all of your life-changing events. You have been the greatest warrior in my life before and during this process; I thank God for giving me you.

To the wonderful, beautiful hearts in my life, I thank you all for uplifting me with your spiritual encouragement, willing me to persevere during unexpected obstacles, distracting me with funny stories and memes, sharing your families with me during holidays, and most important, just being great people in my life during this process. Kedrienne Day, Joy Nettles, Helen Dailey, Tarcia Hubert, Diana Chavez, and Donna Griggs, I greatly appreciate you all and thank you for sharing your strength and wisdom. To my Glitter & Grit girl gang in Austin, Shaunyale Canada, Demetria Gibson, DeChà Reid, Trissi Johnson and Danielle Alsandor, I could not have completed this mission without all of you. Your sisterhood gave me all the ingredients I needed to capture this dream: faith, love and laughter.

To the Educational Leadership and Policy department, I thank all of you for fostering my academic growth; it was truly a remarkable experience being among so many outstanding faculty, staff, administrators, and peers who challenged me to go beyond my goals and change the world. Thank you, Dr. Jennifer Holme, Dr. Cassandre Alvarado, Dr. Martha Ovando, Dr. Victor Saenz, Hortensia Palomares, Dr. Jennifer Smith, Dr. Taryn Ozuna, Dr. Tiffany Lewis, Dr. Amanda Hammond, Dr. Stella Smith, and Andrea Kehoe. You all positively impacted my life in a myriad of ways.

To my Austin Community College family, I thank all of you for giving me the opportunity to continue to grow in my educator and administrative roles during this process. Thank you, Dr. Dorado Kinney and Dr. Sharon Frederick for motivating me to keep working towards fulfilling my goal. Thank you, Prudence Arceneaux, Laura Ore, Stacey Stover, Brian Yansky, Jennifer Hernandez, Frank Cronin, Dr. Jesse Jackson, Delores Segura, Cynthia Arevalo, Zachary Bundy, Dr. Charles Cook, and Dr. Mariano Diaz-Miranda for supporting me throughout this experience.

To my Texas Association of Black Personnel in Higher Education family, I elevated my dreams because of all the great examples of educators and researchers I was surrounded by during board and chapter meetings and at our annual conferences. It is because of you all that I worked even more to complete this mission so that I could support and make the needed changes in higher education for future Black college students that I have witnessed you all be at your respective colleges and universities. To my sorors of the Iota Kappa chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., I thank all of you for being there at the beginning of this dream at USM and cheering me on to the very end. Shatonya Crayton, LaTonya Moore, Christie Scott, Qiana Broughton, and all of my fall '98 sisters, I thank you all dearly for every unforgettable moment.

To all of my students at Austin Community College, I thank you for inspiring me and showing me every day why this work was so important to complete. My greatest hope is for you all to take the baton and accomplish all of your dreams and make this world even greater. To my UT Austin student participants, I cannot thank you enough for sacrificing your time and sharing with me all of your dynamic experiences. You all



turned every obstacle into an opportunity to succeed, and I am so proud of all of the dynamic things you are doing and will continue to do in your lives. To Kathleen O'Connor, thank you for all of your hard work; it was greatly appreciated.

Rev. Franklin Taylor, Dr. Hazel Ward, and Jake Fulton, Jr., thank you being there for me during this process whenever I needed advice or just to talk about life. I know that you are still continuing to listen to me from the heavens above. Thank you for being the extra wind when I needed it. To Dr. Anne Fulton, my dearest aunt and greatest supporter, I thank you for watching over me as I kept your dissertational book beside me throughout this journey. As a first-grader, you told me that I was going to be a doctor one day, and by God's grace and your encouraging hands, I am.

## **Abstract**

# **FROM REGISTRATION TO GRADUATION: THE PERSISTENCE OF BLACK STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN**

by

Deanna Michelle Johnson, PhD

The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

Supervisors: Beth Bukoski, Liliana Garces

Black undergraduate students continue to be ranked as the student population with the lowest ability to persist to completion in higher education. Though colleges across the nation have implemented systems to alleviate this issue, Black undergraduate students still do not persist to graduation at a rate parallel to other races of students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the characteristics and experiences of Black senior-level undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin with impending graduation dates, the barriers they encountered in college and the factors that supported their ability to persist from registration to graduation, thus earning an undergraduate

degree. Utilizing Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model and Theory of Involvement and Tinto's Theory of Departure, this study explored the barriers hindering Black student persistence such as being academically underprepared and financially strained as well as revamping adaptation skills for their college experiences. It also explored the supporting factors, such as financial support, mentors, and involvement in social activities such as student organizations that assist Black undergraduate students' ability to persist.

The research questions addressed were directed toward acquiring information from senior-level UT Austin Black undergraduate students with impending graduation dates, through individual interviews and a focus group, regarding their pre-college experiences, the barriers they encountered while persisting to completion, and the supportive factors that enabled them to successfully complete their undergraduate studies.

The research revealed that the aforementioned supporting factors and the barriers, along with other emerging supportive factors and barriers in the data, were major indicators of whether Black undergraduates persisted based on their ability to combat the barriers by properly utilizing the supportive factors available at UT Austin. Results from this study have the ability to provide useful information to UT Austin's faculty/staff and administrators regarding the policies and procedures that need to be both revamped and implemented to assist Black undergraduate students with the ability to persist to completion at the institution.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There are those who contend that it does not benefit African-Americans to get them into the University of Texas where they do not do well, as opposed to having them go to a less-advanced school, a slower-track school where they do well. One of the briefs pointed out that most of the black scientists in this country don't come from schools like the University of Texas. They come from lesser schools where they do not feel that they're being pushed ahead in classes that are too fast for them. Maybe it (U.T.) ought to have fewer (Blacks). (de Vogue, 2015, p. 1).

Astoundingly, in the year 2015, this remark was made by the deceased Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia during arguments of *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013), an affirmative action lawsuit initiated by a White student, Abigail Fisher, on the grounds that she was denied admission because of her race. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas further reiterated Justice Scalia's opinion by stating that many Black and Hispanic students inevitably underperform at elite colleges because they are academically mismatched and would have excelled at less selective colleges (de Vogue, 2015). Many people were understandably disheartened by these comments and argued that they further expanded the idea of racial inferiority and disparaged both Black students and historically Black colleges, for these institutions were the primary educators of these students in the past and are the present (de Vogue, 2015). Undeniably, these statements also served to undermine the initiative set by former President Obama to increase college access of all American citizens, allowing the United States to rank the highest in the world regarding educational attainment (Southern Education Foundation [SEF], 2012). For the past few years, the focus of higher educational institutions has continued to be directed towards degree completion, particularly regarding supporting students of color, who represent the fastest growing segment of the country's population, but who continually remain



underrepresented in higher education (SEF, 2012). Therefore, to have two supreme court justices (one a former Black student who was the first in his family to attend college and help to found a Black Student Union in response to racism on his college campus) make such condescending statements, while the rest of the Nation pushes for the advancement of minorities in and through education, serves as a reminder that Black students are still at a deficit in terms of higher education access and the ability to persist once they are admitted into universities.

Across the Nation, there have been continuous efforts to enroll more Black students in higher education. As a result, many institutions have designed systems and implemented strategies to recruit this underrepresented population. However, colleges often do not effectively create systems to support these students throughout their college experiences. As a result, many of them do not complete their studies because of being academically unprepared, overly financially strained and unequipped socially to adapt and be successful in their new collegiate environments. Therefore, it is imperative that higher educational institutions not only identify these barriers, but also maximize the access to supporting factors (e.g., creating more financial aid resources, providing more mentoring opportunities for academic and social integration, and supporting student organizations and programs) as a means to get students from registration to graduation.

In response to the Civil Rights Movement, the United States made a significant effort to address the inequities that Black people had endured for centuries (Allen, 1992). One of the greatest inequities to be addressed was the lack of access to higher education for Blacks in predominately White institutions. During the late 20th century, there was a

significant increase in this group of students enrolling in colleges and universities. In fact, from 1976 to 2011, the Black student enrollment rose from 10% to 15% in colleges (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). Although the percentage of Black students increased from 10% to 14% in 2017, that 14% is actually a decrease from the 2011 enrollment (NCES, 2020).

Across the Nation, Black students continue to be the most underrepresented group of students on college campuses in terms of college enrollment, academic achievement and degree attainment (Freeman, 1997, 1999; NCES, 2005; Nettles, 1991; Walpole, 2008; Wilson, 1998). According to Laird et al. (2007), these students are often “subjected to economic, social and racial disparities” (pp. 40) that affect their ability to access and engage in higher education. Not being able to afford their course necessities or to develop a peer group for both academic and social support, and being subjected to racial stereotypes on campus, both in the classroom and outside of it, causes them to struggle to adapt to their new environments.

Students who are socially disadvantaged and academically less prepared, and who experience a lack of resources and support from significant others, are less likely to stay in college (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009, p. 547). This is especially detrimental to Black students because they are the population of students who are most likely to fit into these areas.

In the fall of 2014, more than 1.6 million students participated in Texas’ higher education programs, which was almost 600,000 more students than in the fall of 2000, which was only 47,500 away students from achieving the fall 2015 *Closing the Gaps* goal

for participation rates (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 60x30TX, 2015). Black students reached the targeted goal designated for this group by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in fall 2009; though it met its target goal of more than 64,000, it yet had a reduction of nearly 4,000 students in fall 2013 and 700 students in fall 2014. Its peak participation rate regarding the Black population in Texas was 7.9% in fall 2012, with a 7.5% enrollment in fall 2014 (CTG, 2015). In fall 2019, almost 51,000 students were enrolled in Texas public universities, with 38.3% White, 25.2% Hispanic and only 5.1% Black (THECB, 2020). These percentages are parallel to the previous years for Black enrollment, with more than 78,637 enrolled in 2017, 78,995 in 2018, and 77,949 in 2019.

In fall 2020, about 127,000 students enrolled in Texas public universities, and that enrollment number is expected to increase substantially until 2035 (THECB, 2020). The University of Texas Austin had a -1.3% decrease between the years 2015-2020. In fall 2019, the University of Texas at Austin's (UTA) enrollment was 33.9% White, 28.4% Hispanic, and 5.3% Black, which amounts to only 2,501 Black students. Although this is a low number, it is higher than the 2017 enrollment of 2,384 and the 2018 enrollment of 2,384 (THECB, 2020).

In 2019, Texas public universities awarded undergraduate degrees to 43.2% White students, with Hispanics earning 22.5% and Black students earning 4.6% of the total number of degrees granted (THECB, 2020). The UTA's numbers parallel these numbers, with 38.3% White, 25.4% Hispanic, and 5.1% Black students earning degrees in fall 2019. These percentage gaps are also exhibited when they are broken down by sex.

In 2019, 2,049 White men earned degrees, while only 983 Hispanic men and 150 Black men earned degrees. Regarding women, only 317 Black women earned degrees compared to 1,288 Hispanic women and 2,317 White women who earned degrees.

In 2020, the degrees awarded by the UTA increased among the White and Hispanic men, who earned 2,059 and 1,055 degrees respectively, and White and Hispanic women, who earned 2,454 and 1,571 degrees respectively. Concerning the Black students, the women decreased to 308 women who earned degrees; however, the Black men increased by 40 to 190 degree earners (THECB, 2020).

Texas addressed the low persistence rates of Black students, along with other issues, through its report (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 60x30TX, 2015). Although most of the targeted goals achieved or exceeded expectations, the four areas of focus continue to include participation, success, excellence and research (CTG, 2017). Strategies, such as strengthening developmental education, expediting comprehensive student support systems and creating more financial opportunities, were developed to improve the persistence rates of low percentage groups, such as Black students. These rates had to be improved so that students from this population could enter completion to increase their opportunities for social mobility, especially those students who are enrolled in Central Texas universities. The THECB (2021) continues to address these issues, focusing on more Texans earning degrees, higher completion rates, and decreased student debt after graduation.

The Austin metropolitan statistical area (MSA) surpassed 2.0 million in 2015, with a 37.7% increase in population by the end of the 2015 decade (Austin Chamber of

Commerce [ACC], 2016). By 2018, the population had an increase of 32.7% (ACC, 2021). Within the population, there are 170,552 Black people, which is an increase from the 153,000 recorded in 2015. Almost 50% of the Austin MSA has at minimum a bachelor's degree, with 16.6% of them having a graduate degree as well (ACC, 2021). As a result, Austin was ranked sixth among best educated metropolitan areas. Companies are lured to the area because of its skilled and competitive labor force, making Austin the second best job growth prospect because of the major high-technology companies that are expanding in the area or moving their corporate headquarters to the area (Barr, 2014). These expansions have caused the area to be identified as having the third highest net migration rate in the last 5 years in the United States as more people move to take advantage of the employment opportunities. Most of this labor, fortunately, is composed of graduates from Central Texas universities (ACC, 2021).

In 2018, there were approximately 83,000 undergraduate students enrolled in Central Texas' six universities, consisting of UTA, Texas State University (TSU), St. Edward's University, Concordia University, Southwestern University, and Huston-Tillotson University (E-3 Alliance, 2021). More than half of Central Texas high school graduates in 2018 enrolled in a Central Texas college, with UTA enrolling the greatest amount, 33%, only tying with Austin Community College (ACC). However, the Central Texas enrollment rates dropped from 60% in 2008 to only 52% in 2018. Of that percentage, 47% were Black students. Within this group of Black students, 37% were low-income Black men, and 47% of them were Black women (E-3 Alliance, 2021). Unfortunately, even as Black students continue to participate in higher education, their

ability to persist parallels the country and state's persistence trends as they are the lowest ranking student group.

Therefore, it is critical that Black students who are enrolled at the UTA have the resources needed to enroll, persist, and graduate from college. To help with this feat, entities such as Central Texas' E-3 Alliance, the ACC, and other educationally focused organizations are creating programs to help with underrepresented students. Although these policies and programs are being implemented by entities that support student persistence, it is yet vital that UTA strengthen existing policies, create innovative programs, and revamp the existing curriculums and practices to support the persistence of Black students, who continue to have the lowest rate of persistence in these institutions. Therefore, in this chapter, the researcher presents the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, an overview of the methodology, definitions of the terms, the delimitations and limitations, assumptions, the significance of study, and a final summary of the topic.

### **Statement of the Problem**

More than half of Central Texas' high school graduates enrolled in 4-year institutions in 2018, and TSU and the UTA ranked the highest in educating the area's college undergraduate enrollees who chose to attend college in state (E-3 Alliance, 2021). UTA, which was evenly balanced with the only community college in the area, ACC, accounted for the majority undergraduate enrollment by enrolling 1,043 of the 4,470 high school graduates.

The number of Black students who participated in higher education continues to increase, nationally, statewide and in the Central Texas area; however, this student population is having major difficulties persisting towards completion. The 2017 Texas Black high graduates had the lowest persistence rate in higher education, with a 72% rate compared to 88% of White students (E-3 Alliance, 2021). As identified in research, these barriers might exist because of the socioeconomic backgrounds of many of these students. Low persistence rates to college completion can be considered by income level as 36% of non-low-income students who earned a higher education credential within 6 years, while only 11% of low-income students achieved this target (E-3 Alliance, 2015). Within the 2017 high school graduates who persisted to the second year of higher education, 85% of non-low-income Black women persisted with Black men rating at 76%. However, only 72% of the low-income Black women and 60% Black men persisted to the second year (E-3 Alliance, 2021). These low rates are often attributed to not having adequate financial means, academic preparation, and the social adaptation skills needed to navigate and be successful in college.

The persistence of these students plays a major role in the enhancement of their lives. Persistence is important, for “the African American middle class is growing and college attendance and degree completion have been viewed as critical for social mobility, especially within the African American middle class” (Walpole, 2008, pp. 239). With the dynamic of Central Texas’ expanding economy and the need to have a higher educational degree for employment, it is important that these students earn a degree. In

the Central Texas area, high-technology companies continue to expand and select their labor force from the graduates of area universities (ACC, 2014).

The metropolitan area, Austin-Round Rock-San Marcos, is one of eight metropolitan areas nationally that has created more mid-level employment opportunities today than were available in 2007 (Kotkin, 2013). However, these jobs require some type of credential beyond high school, and it is predicted that 65% of jobs will require these same credentials in 2020 (E-3 Alliance, 2015). As with other progressive metropolitan areas, Austin's economy continues to get stronger because it combines the characteristics attributed to economic strongholds, "educated people, tech-oriented industries, [and] racial diversity" (Kotkin, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, it is imperative that Black students not only participate in higher education, but also persist to completion to acquire future financial stability for themselves and to support the growth of the Central Texas' economy.

Higher persistence rates are not only instrumental for the future financial stability of current Black students, giving them opportunities to be positive role models in communities for other Black youth, but they are also of major importance when exploring the persistence rates of incoming Black students on college campuses. Research has proven that this student population is academically and socially successful when it is surrounded with faculty, staff, and peers who are of the same race and can serve as mentors during their college experience. These institutional agents are able to help these underrepresented students to navigate through the unfamiliar territory that they will encounter, both inside and outside of their classroom environments. Having more Black



people serving in these capacities will benefit UTA as it strives to retain those diverse students that it has recruited onto its college campus.

Black students are increasing their enrollment in Central Texas higher educational institutions, including UTA. Though efforts to recruit and enroll this student population have been highly effective, a major disconnect has occurred in several areas of their college experiences creating barriers that are either slowing or halting their ability to persist to completion.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics and experiences of Black senior-level undergraduates at UTA with impending graduation dates, the barriers they encountered in college, and the factors that supported their ability to persist from registration to graduation, thus earning an undergraduate degree.

The barriers might occur because of obstacles encountered at their institution and surrounding environments, including but not limited to being academically underprepared, increasing college costs, and lacking the ability to adapt to campus culture during their college experiences. These barriers could be combated by supporting factors: financial support, mentors, and involvement in the social activities of student organizations. These barriers and supporting factors are explored using Tinto's theory of student departure and Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model and theory of involvement.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study and assisted the researcher in discovering the barriers and supporting factors that hinder or promote student persistence for Black senior-level undergraduate students at UTA.

1. How do Black senior-level undergraduates at UTA with impending graduation dates describe their college knowledge prior to enrolling?
2. How do Black senior-level undergraduates at UTA make meaning of the barriers they encountered during their college experience?
3. How do Black senior-level undergraduates at UTA make meaning of the supporting factors that assisted them in their ability to persist?

## **Brief Overview of Methodology**

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of Black, senior-level, undergraduates with impending graduation dates at UTA and their ability to persist. In the study, the researcher sought to explore the supporting factors that positively affected persistence and the barriers that served as obstacles.

The selected site for this study was UTA, a traditionally White institution and a large, top-tier research university that has ranked among the top 40 colleges in the Nation. The site was chosen as a means of gathering information about campus culture, its surrounding environment, and student experiences from one race of students attending the top-ranked college in Texas, which recently activated a plan to recruit and retain Black students.

The participants included 11 Black undergraduate seniors, eight women and three men who had impending graduation dates at UTA. All of these students were top-ranked in their high schools, and they had also integrated into the campus community by being actively involved in student organizations. The recruitment of students proved to be a difficult task because students were no longer living or attending classes and other social activities on campus because of COVID-19 restrictions in the state. As a result, all recruitment efforts were conducted via emails through a network of campus divisions that were geared towards diversity, campus cultural centers, student organizations, and specialized minority institutions/programs to ensure campus-wide representation and to foster diversity of the student perspectives. In addition, selecting students through these methods allowed various socioeconomic backgrounds to be represented in the group.

COVID-19 effects also affected the participation rate of students. A couple of the obstacles that affected the persistence of the students that was explored in this study also affected the participation rate in the study. Initially, 18 students volunteered to participate; however, seven of them withdrew because they had to schedule more hours at work or had to work multiple jobs because of the financial strain caused by losing an on-campus job. In addition, some students withdrew because they had to devote more time to studying and preparing for midterm papers, projects, and exams because of flagging grades that were the effects of not being able to use learning resources such as tutors, and were not able to adjust to the online learning environment, including having access to their professor for office hours.

The participants were informed, by means of a **consent form** sent to their email and by verbal agreement done virtually, about the purpose of the study and its potential to enhance upcoming Black undergraduates' ability to be successful in college. The consent form also made them aware that all personal information would be protected by a given pseudonym. Only one interview that averaged 2 hours was conducted with each the individuals to collect data that helped the researcher to identify themes in the students' homes, campus cultures, and student experiences (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Flexibility with unexpected emerged themes was also permitted during the interviews.

A focus group was also conducted with seven students. Structured questions led the focus groups, but flexibility was allowed so that students could dialogue about the themes that unexpectedly emerged according to their student experiences. The topics also discussed in the group focused on the services and resources that UTA should increase or revamp to provide an environment that would better encourage and produce success for Black students. Both the focus groups and interviews were recorded through visual footage, audio recordings, and note taking. The information was stored, using Dropbox and a USB drive.

Phenomenology explores the lived experiences of individuals through interviews to gain an understanding of how their behaviors and beliefs were formed (Creswell, 2007). Using a phenomenological framework, the researcher reviewed and transcribed the data gathered from the interviews and focus group. The researcher then coded the data according to the themes that emerged from the data. These themes were then connected to the major components of Tinto's theory of student departure and Astin

Input-Environment-Outcome Model and theory of involvement to explain the significance of the students' responses. The findings of the data were also aligned to the model and theories because they were focused on students' ability to adapt to social and academic environments.

### **Definition of Terms**

*First-generation students:* These students frequently enter college with less academic preparation, have limited access to information about the college experience (Thayor, 2000); and have parents who did not attend college, which causes them to receive less help from their parents during the college journey (Choy, 2001).

*Persist:* Persistence is the student's ability to successfully complete their undergraduate requirement and graduate

*Withdraw:* To withdraw from a college means to discontinue the undergraduate program.

*Postsecondary Institution:* These educational institutions confer baccalaureate degrees.

*Traditionally White institutions:* These institutions were traditionally composed of White students as the majority population.

*Historically Black colleges and universities:* These institutions were created prior to the Higher Education Act of 1965 to give Blacks access to higher education.

*Central Texas area:* For research purposes, this area of Texas will be identified as the Austin-Round Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area. The MSA is defined as an area with a substantial population center (a county), and adjacent areas (counties) having a

high degree of economic homogeneity, where economic integration is usually measured by commuting patterns. The Austin-Round Rock MSA consists of Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, and Williamson Counties (State of Texas Government, 2014).

*Socioeconomic*: This term denotes a combination of social and economic factors.

*Student integration*: The ability of a student to adapt successfully to their campus environment is called student integration.

### **Delimitations**

**In** this study, the researcher addressed only Black, senior-level, undergraduate students at UTA with impending graduation dates. Instead of addressing the entire expansive group of minority students, the researcher explored only the persistence of one student population that was *minoritized* during its pre-college experience and continues to be during its undergraduate journey. The study was also centered on one higher educational campus; therefore, it does not represent the student experiences of Black students in institutions statewide or nationally. In addition, the main focus was on the experiences of the Black, senior-level undergraduates and how they individually navigated their academic and social lives, leading to their coming graduation from UTA.

### **Limitations**

The design of this study involved only one higher educational institution; therefore, no wider range of student perspectives of persistence were explored in this demographic area. The experiences of Black students in Central Texas colleges will not be fully captured because each university, its mission, campus culture, and student population are uniquely different. Therefore, each of these institutions might need to be

further explored to attain more accurate data that would represent its campus environment, for these student voices cannot represent the entire Black population in this area. Therefore, wide generalization will not be possible.

### **Assumptions**

The researcher assumed that UTA had student services and academic programs that had been designed to help its students to integrate into their campus environment. The researcher also presumed that this institution had social activities that cultural centers and student organizations had created and designed to help these students succeed. However, the percentage of Black students graduating from this institution a continuous gap compared to other racial groups; therefore, the researcher assumed that these students were not adapting into and benefitting from the academic and social systems of these universities. In addition, the researcher assumed that the increasing cost of education and declining financial aid were barriers to the students' ability to persist, which is further intensified by the students' lack of academic preparation, social capital, and familial guidance, possibly because they were first-generation college students.

### **Significance of Study**

This study has implications for society-at-large, state policymakers, educational administrators of higher education institutions, instructors, parents, and students. The attainment of a postsecondary degree positively affects the social mobility of all citizens, especially minority groups. With a greater earning ability, the Black population will be able to contribute more to the economy and to develop businesses that increase the growth of the country's economic system. If more minorities earn degrees, the Texas

economy will benefit. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 60x30TX (2015), when the majority of Texas residents earn higher education credentials, it “boosts the state’s know-how and resourcefulness, helps build a more productive workforce, and a more educated workforce leads to innovation and expansion and more economic opportunities” (p. 11). To achieve these goals, policymakers must implement initiatives and provide funding that will allow educational administrators to create academic and social programs that support the persistence of Black students. Having more students enrolled from this racial group will increase diversity on college campuses and inside the classrooms, providing a more culturally enhanced environment for the entire college population. In addition, with more Black students enrolling and graduating from universities, they will be more informed and skillfully able to help the following generations navigate the college system. This will inevitably help discontinue the cycle of college academic and social unpreparedness as more minority students persist in universities.

### **Summary**

The enrollment of Black students in Central Texas universities, including UTA, continues to increase; however, a disparity yet exists in their ability to persist compared to other minority and nonminority groups. Today, it is essential that these students earn a postsecondary degree; therefore, it is important to explore the factors that affect the persistence of Black students. In the literature review, the researcher synthesizes the facts that are known about the major barriers and supporting factors that detour or assist



students to degree completion and about the theoretical models that are used to describe the experiences of this population.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The number of minority students in K-12 is steadily increasing; however, these students are disproportionately not completing their postsecondary education (Keller, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998; Carter, 2006). Black students, in particular, are continuously ranking as the lowest or second to lowest in persistence rates nationally, statewide and locally in Central Texas. Consequently, this impacts the diversity on college campuses and the long-term social mobility of these students is affected when they do not complete their college studies as acquiring a bachelor's degree often leads to greater net dividends from them in the future (Carter, 2006; Malveaux, 2003).

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature that analyzes the history of higher education access for Black students in Texas, the factors that serve as supportive academic and social resources to Black students and the barriers that prevent the persistence of this group. The theoretical framework being used for this study will also be reviewed in this chapter.

### **College Access for Black Students in Texas**

There were many strict laws put in place to oppress Black people prior to the ending of the Civil War. One such law in the Southern states prohibited the teaching of Blacks to read and write because of the threats of slave uprisings coupled with the fear of them possibly wanting to free themselves from repressive work conditions (Myers, 1989). White southerners wanted to limit the educational quality for Black people in an effort "to cripple the political aspirations of African Americans, inhibit the ability of Blacks to compete with them economically, and to insure a low-skilled, menial labor

force” (Samuels, 2004, p. 34). At the end of the Civil War in 1865, however, the Freedman’s Bureau, religious organizations, philanthropists and newly freed slaves developed and promoted educational resources for Blacks by establishing schools (Myers, 1989). Though the primary emphasis was providing Blacks with rudimentary skills, the expansion of education led to the establishment of most of today’s existing historically Black colleges and universities. In 1873, Wiley College, founded in Marshall, Texas, by the Black Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, became the first college level institution for Negroes west of the Mississippi River (Barr, 1996).

Between 1875 to 1905, the number of Black colleges in Texas grew from two to eleven, causing the state to be ranked high in Black student enrollment and graduates (Barr, 1996). However, the total number of students enrolled was still a small percentage of the Black population in Texas. In 1878, the state created Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College for the education of Blacks under the control of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College. The following year, the state government converted it into a normal school for teachers and later added an industrial and mechanical component under the land grant funding.

Prairie View A & M College, however, was one of the land-grant institutions formed and continuously discriminated against by state governments that deliberately appropriated unequal funding to these institutions. Land-grant colleges were developed through the Morrill Act of 1862, allowing federally controlled land from each state to be sold with the proceeds going towards endowments, maintenance and support of colleges where learning is related to agriculture and mechanical arts, engineering and other

scientific disciplines (Samuels, 2004). These institutions would go beyond traditional curriculum and evolve into research, scientific developing institutions that helped the nation in industry and government.

However, since state legislatures had the authority to distribute the Morrill funds, Black institutions were overlooked. In fact, only three states shared funds with Black colleges in the nearly thirty years that the first Act was established; these discriminatory actions were cited and led to the development of The Second Morrill Act of 1890 (Samuels, 2004). This Act required states to distribute equitable funds to benefit Black and White students and forbade institutions from receiving funds if they used discriminatory admission policies. However, the seventeen southern and border states still continued to discriminate against the Black colleges that were established or designated as land grant colleges. States consistently denied funding or only distributed a fraction of the legally entitled funds to the Black colleges (Samuels, 2004).

The budgets for White universities grew with demand while the budgets for the Black colleges remained stagnant (Samuels, 2004). Legislative neglect also affected the curricula of the institutions; while White universities created diverse academic programs, Black colleges were burdened with the responsibility of educating academically underprepared college-ready students. This was in part because of the South having only sixty-four public Black high schools in the early 1900's, with only forty of those offering a four-year curriculum (Samuels, 2004). As a result, Black colleges had to direct their limited funds towards preparatory and secondary education, so bachelor degree programs did not take form in most of these colleges until the 1930's. Moreover, these colleges

primarily only focused educating students in teacher training programs and manual skills subjects such as blacksmithing and carpentry (Samuels, 2004).

In the Central Texas area, Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute in Austin was established by the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church in 1881 (Barr, 1996). In 1882, a year after Tillotson was established, Texans voted for a state public Negro university in Austin; however, it was not denied. A year later, The Freedman's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, along with the support of local Black residents, bought land in Austin, began the construction of a college in 1890, and by 1900 Samuel Huston College opened with a student body of 83 students (Barr, 1996).

*Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) established the separate but equal constitutionally recognized and enforced state law that permitted the segregation of races in public facilities. Though many hoped for change in terms of the requirement of equal treatment, there were many violations, particularly in public colleges (Myers, 1989). For instance, tax funds were not equitably distributed among the colleges even though Black residents were taxed; Black colleges either received far less or no support at all. As a result, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), along with the assistance of Black lawyers, consistently challenged the separate but equal doctrine. The same year *Plessy* was enstated, the Colored Teacher's State Association began a petition again in an effort to create a separate university in Austin; consequently, the state Supreme Court declared it as unconstitutional since public land was at a minimal. To

appease the Black population, classical and scientific programs were added at Prairie View in 1901 by the legislature (Barr, 1996).

During this time, Black Texans had the lowest illiteracy rate in the South at 38% (Barr, 1996). However, White Texans continued to argue that educating Blacks would increase their want to oppose restricted economic, social and political statuses placed on them, other White counterparts argued that the state's interest would be advanced with more educated people. They urged the state to appropriate more funds towards improving industrial, mechanical, and agricultural studies for Blacks, which would then transfer to occupational skills when they completed their studies.

Eventually, federal aid in the form of the Morrill Act and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 helped establish more training facilities and high school level institutions in Texas; however, the majority of Black colleges still struggled with students with limited educational skills (Barr, 1996). In 1914, out of all the Black colleges in Texas, only 129 students were enrolled in college credit courses, with that number increasing to 600 almost ten years later. In 1929, Samuel Huston College eliminated its noncollege courses for students. Unfortunately, inequities in education continued to persist in Texas. In the summer of 1941, the legislature rejected Prairie View's proposal of \$168,000 in appropriations to build a library (Shabazz, 2004). In addition to the rejection, its budget was the only one cut among state-supported colleges. Continuously, Black colleges were forced to educate its students with limited resources. Eventually, in an effort to strengthen its faculty, student body, and financial level, Tillotson College, once a community college, and Huston merged into Huston-Tillotson in 1952 (Barr, 1996).

Despite the absence of needed funds for facilities and educational resources, Black colleges continued to produce political, business and educational leaders who helped advance the African American population in Texas (Barr, 1996). In 1940, there were over 9,000 Black professionals, and almost 7,000 were teachers and college faculty (Shabazz, 2004).

Along with the battle of desegregating lower level school systems in the state, the Texas Council of Negro Organizations pressed the state in 1943 about the desegregation of higher education as well (Barr, 1996). In 1944, the Bi-racial Commission of Negro Education in Texas (BCNET) further pressed the state with the release of its study, *The Senior Colleges for Negroes in Texas* (Shabazz, 2004). It argued that two of the most prominent problems with the state's educational system was its lack of funding for Prairie View and its insufficient means of graduate and professional education for Blacks. Mirroring several strategic plans developed by the state of Texas and higher educational institutions, it stated that Black Texan were negatively affected economically, culturally, and educationally because of the lack of quality educational opportunities.

However, in an effort to sustain separate and segregated colleges in the 1940's, states developed strategies to detour the integration of races (Myers, 1989). Some strategies even included the development of scholarships to encourage Black students to go to out-of-state professional schools versus in-state colleges; in some cases, graduate and law schools were promptly affixed to existing in-state Black colleges as a means of detouring integration. In 1945, the legislature officially constituted Prairie View as a university. This measure, however, offended Black residents because it did not increase

the funding at Prairie View. In BCNET's study, it argued that funding had not been distributed to the school for a new building since 1925 (Shabazz, 2004). Residents were also angry because the measure halted integration of the University of Texas and the creation of a new Black university. This inevitably led to the Texas Council of Negro Organizations and the state NAACP challenging segregation at the UTA (Barr, 1996).

In 1945, the Texas government estimated that it would take 25 million to construct a Black university comparable to the UTA (UT); as a result, government officials continued to try to lessen the impending uproar by offering false promises about creating Prairie View into a premier university (Lavergne, 2010). However, the university was not provided funding for the hiring of faculty, the attainment of library resources, or the construction of new facilities.

As a result, the NAACP continued with its plans to file a lawsuit against UT as it had many state-owned resources for utilization (Lavergne, 2010). This was an important factor as it would prove that if an institution with these funding resources could not provide equity then no other college could either in the segregated states. In most of the southern states, separate-but-equal facilities were few, and some states were completely without facilities for African Americans. The state of Texas did not have a law school, so Thurgood Marshall projected that this would be an ideal target to show the financial lacking of states to produce equitable facilities for Blacks, thus forcing states to integrate existing institutions (Lavergne, 2010).

Heman Sweatt was selected as the plaintiff to file the lawsuit against the Regents of the UTA (Lavergne, 2010). A graduate of Wiley College, the first college established



for Blacks in Texas, Sweat submitted his transcripts to be admitted into the Law School of the University of Texas on February 26, 1946, and shortly after this submission, UT formally denied Sweat's admittance into the university.

During the first hearing in the *Sweatt v. Painter* (1946), it was ruled that the state of Texas did not admit Sweatt into UT's law school based on the state's segregation law, but it also did not provide a state-supported college for African Americans to study law (Lavergne, 2010). Though the state government was working tirelessly to keep Blacks from attending UT, polls taken on campus as well as student-involved community meetings indicated that the traditionally White student body supported the principle of integration on its campus, even participating in the marches against discrimination and urging UT to raise its standards (Shabazz, 2004).

The 1947 Senate Bill 140 was issued to create a premier university for the Black population, and it was made clear that it would not be an extension of UT nor have access to the Permanent University Fund (Lavergne, 2010). As a result, UT Regents hurriedly created a temporary law school for Black students, which gave students access to the State Law Library in the Capitol, provided them with the teachings of UT Law faculty, and the school was soon to be certified by the American Bar Association and the American Association of Law Schools. The temporary law school, which was both physically and socially disconnected to the main campus, was closed on March 17, 1947, after four days of not admitting any students. Years later, it was argued that the state had prevailed in establishing an even better law school than the one at UT. However, Marshall declared, "They can build an exact duplicate of the University of Texas Law

School in brick, mortar, desks, and libraries, but it will make no difference as long as it is segregated” (Lavergne, 2010, p. 246). On June 5, 1950, the Supreme Court ruled that Texas creating a law school would be dismal in comparison as it would not have the same foundation and reputation as UT’s law school, which was powered by its faculty, alumni, and traditions. In September, Sweatt and five other African American students enrolled in UT’s law school. This was significant as UT had only served as a symbol of segregation for Austin’s Black population, who recognized the university as a means of employment and not education (Lavergne, 2010).

As expected, Sweatt and his fellow Black classmates, experienced some incidents of racism in the integration process. There were cross-burning and tire-slashing incidents, but they were still welcomed by many White liberal students and into the campus’ facilities (Shabazz, 2004). There was financial hardship as well, however. Though the Sweatt Victory Fund agreed to financially support his academic studies after the NAACP could not raise the needed funds, it, too, was financially unreliable (Lavergne, 2010). Even more discouragingly, being academically underprepared, particularly in writing, caused more strain. The next summer, Sweatt was denied readmittance to the law school because of poor academic performance. Out of the six African American students who were admitted in September of 1950, only two completed their studies.

Despite the unfortunate academic outcomes, *Sweatt vs Painter* (1950), however, served as a gateway to desegregation in Texas colleges and universities with the backing of *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954) calling for the abandonment of ‘separate but

equal' school systems (Shabazz, 2004). The higher education system of Texas, thus, became the forefront of the civil rights fight for equality in the school systems.

During the period between 1964 and 1976, many people wanted to implement policies that increased the enrollment levels of Black students at predominantly White colleges and universities and increased the number of White students on Black college campuses (Myers, 1989). Not only did policy makers and corporate donors push these policies, Federal administrators and middle-class Black people endorsed them, as well. It was in an effort to have the education of Blacks be accessible at predominately White colleges as these colleges had diverse curriculums and quality faculty members. In fact, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 required public colleges and universities to use affirmative action plans to increase the Black student population or risk the consequence of losing Federal funding (Myers, 1989).

Desegregation policies appeared to be expanding the educational opportunities of Black students in the mid-sixties and seventies, their enrollment doubled in postsecondary schools, and they matriculated into college at almost the same rate as White students (Myers, 1989). Although there was an increase in their enrollment at predominately White colleges, they were still enrolling in Black colleges and universities. This could be in part because of the increase of college-age Blacks in the population and the increased financial aid support and availability to low-income students, which would have included the majority of Black students. These students were also continuing the fight by demanding curriculums be revamped, Black Studies departments be added on

campuses, and the hiring of more Black faculty at historically white universities (Shabazz, 2004).

Unfortunately, although a large percentage of Black students matriculated into predominantly White colleges, the attrition rate was significantly high. Those Black students who did enroll at predominantly White colleges found themselves in hostile environments triggered by racism (Myers, 1989). As a result, these students withdrew from college, never reaching their academic potential. Also, a large percentage of these students were enrolled in community colleges and unequally represented in terminal programs. Furthermore, predominantly White universities encountered fiscal deficits, causing many of them to not offer scholarships to Black students and to retract from hiring additional Black faculty and implementing Black studies programs.

In the *Adams vs. Richardson* (1970) case, initiated by the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), plaintiffs argued that colleges and universities continued to discriminate and segregate students based on race (Myers, 1989). This was contradictory to Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, yet these colleges were still being distributed Federal funds. In 1981, Texas was one of the states cited for violating Title VI by continuing to operate segregated dual systems of higher education (Myers, 1989). It was one of the states, however, allowed to negotiate with the Office for Civil Rights by committing to remove the vestiges of segregation through plans which included, “the disestablishment of the structure of the dual system, desegregation of student enrollment, and desegregation of faculty, administrative staffs, nonacademic personnel and governing boards” (Myers, 1989, p. 36).

Forty years later, colleges across Texas are improving access to college for Black students. The UTA, the college that opened the doors to equal access to a quality education for Black students is ranked as one of the top-degree granting colleges for minorities in the country. It was thrown back at the forefront of higher education for Black students as it was at the center of a historical case, *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (2008) determining if race should remain a part of the admission process to ensure a diverse campus (Arnett, 2015). The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the university, making note that the college needs to continue to evaluate its students' data as a means of upholding the necessity of acknowledging race in its academic-holistic admissions process.

Texas colleges and universities are still working to improve the state of education for all its Black students, but there is still a lot of work to be done regarding recruitment, persistence and completion. Alarming, the resources that have assisted Black students in pursuing and obtaining a college degree in the past and those academic, social, and financial problems that either slowed or terminated their goal of achieving a degree are identical to the supporting factors and barriers of currently enrolled students. Though the Texas higher education system has made great strides in relation to its beginnings, there are obviously still gaps in the system causing Black students to not be as successful as their peers. Continuing to not have the proper financial support, academic resources, and the balanced ratio of Black faculty/staff to Black students should not be barriers damaging today's Black students' ability to persist as they were for Black students over a hundred years ago. One of the first students to integrate a Central Texas university did

not persist to completion because of these barriers; this should not be the norm for current Black students in the Central Texas area.

The following two sessions will review the literature focusing on the supportive factors and barriers that affect the persistence rate of African American students in Central Texas universities.

### **Supportive Persistence Factors**

This section will review three forms of supportive factors that research has found to be useful in assisting Black students persist from semester to semester until completion.

#### **Financial Assistance**

Financial aid plays and will continue to play a major part in allowing Texas students to participate in higher education (THECB, 2011). It is essential that these students receive this aid as demographic trends continue to show that many of these students are a part of families whose financial resources are very limited and whose members have little to no history of participation in higher education.

In 1987 the Texas Charter for Higher Education was created in an effort to make higher education accessible to all Texas students who wanted to enroll.

Neither financial nor social status should serve as a barrier to opportunities for higher education in Texas. Financial aid as well as academic and social support should be available. Texas colleges and universities shall actively recruit and retain students from populations that have not heretofore fully participated in higher education. (THECB, 2011, p.1)

Between 2017-2018, 84% of the students in public colleges used financial aid, that equates to over 994,000 students out of the over one million students enrolled in four-year colleges nationally (NCES, 2019). Federal grants were awarded to 37.9% of students, with state grants contributing to 38.3%, institutional grants 50.3%, and student loans still being needed for 46% of the students.

Grant aid is one of the most used forms of aid for students from low-income families, which often includes African American students (THECB, 2011). In fact, ninety% of students from families earning \$30,000 or less received grant aid in 2010. The *Towards Excellence, Access and Success Grant* (TEXAS Grant), developed in 1999, is the state's largest grant program. Students are eligible to continue receiving the grant up to 150 hours, five years or until they acquire a bachelor's degree. This grant has been highly useful in meeting the goals of *Closing the Gaps* by helping low-income students remain in college because of the aid assistance. In the 2003 fiscal year all eligible students with financial needs received funding, including middle-income students of support. However, as demand increased, the program's funds became targeted towards the neediest students, but in the 2008 fiscal year appropriations were increased, allowing more students to attend and remain in college (THECB, 2011). In the 2010 fiscal year, over \$200 million was awarded to students. African American students made up 12% of the students enrolled in public universities during that time. 15% of the over 200 million was awarded to 14% of them (THECB, 2011). For the 2020-2021 academic year, students were given \$5,039 per semester (THECB, 2020). This is very beneficial to helping those Black students in Central Texas colleges have the ability to return and

persist towards graduation. The THECB's *60x30TX* strategic plan further extends the assistance by setting out to limit student loan debt to 60% of the wages that students earn in employment their first year out of college (THECB, 2020).

Interestingly, the lack of financial support can also serve as a mechanism for success for students from low-income families. Douglas Guiffrida found that African American students may perceive the sacrifices of their families as a means of motivation as they understand that any funds sent to help them while in college is taking away from other financial obligations their families may need to handle at home (2005). For instance, the Austin Metropolitan Statistical Area ranks the lowest in unemployment rates, 3.1%, among the fifty largest national metropolitan areas (Austin Chamber, 2016). However, great concern has been placed on the rising costs of homeownership and rental affordability, especially in poorer neighborhoods taken over by gentrification. This leads to the need of the Austin region working to translate its high wages into equally higher average incomes for every income class, including the lower one. (ACC, 2016). Students in Central Texas from families not earning enough to meet the rising cost of living expenses may then use their families' sacrifice to push them more in their academic careers.

Because of their families' willingness to sacrifice, the students are compelled to earn higher grades and complete their college education, possibly faster than initially expected (Guiffrida, 2005). Their parents' inability to provide continuous financial support also motivates them to persist in college as they want to use their educational skills to advance them in their careers. As a result, they will not only be able to provide



for their families once they graduate but also become more financially stable and break the low-income generational cycle (Guiffrida, 2005). This will not be an easy feat, however, as the 2013 unemployment rate of recent Black college graduates was almost twice the average of non-Black recent graduates (Berman, 2014).

This may be a legitimate factor as well for Black students in Central Texas universities as some of them also receive little to no financial support from family and/or live in single-parent households with minimal incomes. Although the Austin area is experiencing tremendous economic growth, this population is still experiencing employment setbacks. The industry added the most jobs in the business and professional sector, with manufacturing jobs suffering the greatest loss of employment opportunities (Kerr, 2015). Essentially, then, parents of Central Texas Black students must have a substantial degree of education to acquire one of the many recently added sources of job growth opportunities.

There are, however, some Black students whose families are middle to high-income households and have financially prepared for their children's entrance to higher education. In Guiffrida's (2005) study, some students noted that their parents' financial support allowed them to focus on their academics. Most of these students were offspring of parents who were also college graduates, and therefore, their parents understood the necessities of college, which may include the purchase of a computer, textbook fees, or travel expenses. As a result, these parents actively prepared for their children's education by saving funds. Even if the parents involved in the study were not

able to prepare in advance, they were still willing to sacrifice their resources to alleviate some of the stress their children may be encountering in college (Guiffrida, 2005).

According to Guiffrida's (2005) study, it may even be considered an even exchange; the student receives funding now from the family with the hopes of that student being able to financially help the family when he/she has completed his/her education.

As this student mentioned, in addition to allowing them the time to concentrate on academic and extracurricular pursuits, receiving money from home also gave students the feeling that their education was important and valued by their families. Rather than feeling guilty for taking away from scarce family resources, high achievers consistently talked about these sacrifices as motivating them to do well. (Guiffrida, 2005, p. 5)

Families from every income bracket with college-going students are also now able to use revamped financial aid reforms to assist in the funding of these students. Nationally, the Higher Education Act of 1965 assisted African Americans in their educational endeavors by providing postsecondary financial support. The act provided financial assistance by increasing federal aid to universities and developing low-interest loans for low-income students. An amended version of the 1965 act, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) continued to help minority students by implementing such strategies as decreasing interest rates on specified student loans and providing forgiveness for those who work as public servants (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

With the cost of college continuing to rise, costing over \$25,000 for public colleges and over \$40,000 for private institutions in Texas, many Black students rely on federal loans (NCES, 2019). These loans help to increase the participation rate of Blacks in higher education and narrows the degree attainment gap among Black students and

non-Black students as most (Jackson and Reynolds, 2013). In 2015-2016, 88% of Black undergraduates were awarded financial aid. Although \$10,000 was the average aid awarded, Black students averaged \$11,390 per semester (NCES, 2019). With the average loan debt once graduating continuing to increase, the loan forgiveness section helps these students as they begin postgraduation endeavors.

The increasing of Federal Pell Grant rewards, the largest federal financial aid program with its rewards issued to undergraduate students based on demonstrated financial need, most likely will help improve the enrollment and success rate of minority students, but the loan forgiveness section will undoubtedly help many African American students not only persist through college but in their postcollege lives as well. This will allow Central Texas students the ability to then begin saving so that the next generation will not be stressed with the burden of worrying about not having enough financial means for college and/or accumulating a large amount of loan debt and instead, they can focus on their academic responsibilities as they persist from semester to semester. As of now, the outstanding student loan debt in the nation is 1.2 trillion, with the average college graduate balance of 29,000 (Holland, 2015). This debt, inevitably, has led to many people delaying the purchase of homes, having children and pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities.

## **Mentors**

Mentors are those who support students through the guidance of academic and social environments based on their knowledge and experiences. In this section, family

and faculty serving as mentors will be reviewed as supporting factors for the persistence of Black students in Central Texas institutions.

### ***Family***

Financial and moral support from the families of Black students are key supportive persistence factors (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Many Black students enroll into college with the goal of not only enhancing themselves but enriching the lives of their families as well. Herndon and Hirt (2004) found that family support is a significant factor in the persistence of Black students. In their study, they defined family as being composed of both the students' immediate family members and those extended members, such as those in their community institutions such as church or recreational facilities. These individuals are pivotal in establishing the importance of attaining an education and providing the students with coping tools to help them persevere through difficult academic and social experiences. When students feel they are being supported by their communities, they tend to want to be more successful (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Institutional agents, such as those individuals who help Black students gain social capital, are also important in the college success of Black students. They may include neighbors, church members or family friends. These individuals are able to help the students persist by speaking with them about race matters and how to adapt as a minority in a majority environment (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

Many of these members are college graduates who serve as role models and provide meaningful advice as they, too, may have experienced similar collegiate encounters. Due to the lack of positive role models in many low-income areas, students

may have problems readjusting back into their neighborhood peer groups, who may not want to accept the positive changes the student made while he/she was attending college. The mentors who have experienced these types of situations are better equipped at engaging and assisting the student through these obstacles.

The Austin area population is continuing to grow with annual predictions increasing almost every six months. However, as more people are moving to the area, more Black people are choosing to move from the area for various reasons. It would be advantageous to explore the availability of same-race mentors in the surrounding communities and their impact on Black students in the communities as they are a pivotal part in student encouragement to persist.

### ***Faculty***

Faculty members are essential in helping Black students navigate their college experiences. Interaction with faculty influences the persistence behavior of college students (Oseguera and Rhee, 2009). It is, after all, the faculty who “create the respective norms and values of academic environments” (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Weidman, 1989). Students are exposed to these norms in the institutional environments, and as a result, they help describe the learning environments and the students’ learning behavior in these environments (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Bank et al., 1990). Most of the time, these norms and values are opposite of the ones Black students may be used to following. Fortunately, faculty members have a better understanding of the formal and informal culture on college campuses. As a result, they will be able to assist Black students adapt into their new academic and social environments that may not be familiar to them or their families.

The positive outcomes of having a mentor may include attaining a higher GPA, earning more credit hours, and feeling a sense of satisfaction with their college environments (Reddick & Pritchett, 2015; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Cosgrove, 1986). They also are helpful in assisting the students with networking with fellow colleagues or other students and/or joining student organizations.

This type of guidance is typically asserted more on college campuses where the faculty and students may share cultural backgrounds. Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams and Holmes (2007) found that Black students and faculty at historically Black colleges and universities had stronger interaction levels than Black students at predominantly White institutions. This is due, according to the previous researchers, to the active and collaborative learning between students and faculty (Laird et al., 2007). Being able to interact or connect with faculty members off the campus in nonformal settings allows the students to feel more comfortable, thus being able to adjust to the college atmosphere. As a result, these practices and relationships also give the students a sense of meaningful learning development.

When the faculty and students are able to engage and develop relationships beyond the classroom, students are seemingly more likely to engage in the classroom because of the trust that has been established. As a result, their ability and want to learn increases because they feel safe in their environment and do not feel as if they are being judged about their appearance or actions. Like all students, when Black students adapt to their environments, their academic success greatly improves.

Though the roles that mentors play in the retaining of Black students is significant, mentors are not always readily accessible, especially at PWIs (Brittian, Sy & Stokes, 2009; Mitchell & Dell, 1992). Black students often seek to establish relationships with those faculty and staff of the same race, but with the lack of faculty and staff in this racial group on PWI campuses, this can present difficulties. Finding Black institutional members helps these students develop positive identities of self as they have others they can identify with on their respective campuses. Having these members in leadership positions adds to the creation of a supportive environment for these students. The faculty is also pertinent in endorsing the value of education as they engage in mentoring relationships with these individuals. They can help Black students when they are feeling isolated in classrooms or just the opposite, feeling as if they are representing their entire race with their responses during lectures. Thus, the faculty mentors serve as transitional guides for their students.

Though non-Black faculty members may be accessible to the students, some researchers emphasize the need for the mentor and mentee to have similar cultural backgrounds (Dahlvig, 2010). It is stressed that as PWIs continue to promote diversity among its student body, they must also meet the challenge of providing faculty and staff who will be able to help minority students with persistence. In fact, Jackson, Kite, and Branscombe (1996) study found that most Black students preferred a mentor of the same race. Feist-Price (2001) found that these students prefer a member of the same race because of the level of comfortableness, vulnerability to feedback, and paralleling perspectives of the campus environment.

It is, then, imperative that PWIs actively seek and hire more minority faculty and staff at universities as it has been proven as a positive mechanism to supporting the persistence of Black students. Although the percentage of Black students attending PWIs has increased 56% since the 1980s, the amount of Black faculty has not increased along with the trend (Reddick & Pritchett, 2015; Harvery, 2002). In fact, between 1975 to 2005, there has been less than a one% increase of Black faculty on these campuses (Reddick & Pritchett, 2015; NCES, 2007; Parmer & Holmes, 2010; Trower & Chait, 2002). The Black faculty and staff currently at higher educational institutions are outnumbered and often overwhelmed with scholarly and college-involvement responsibilities (Dalvig, 2010). The sense of tokenism often occurs on PWI campuses as Black faculty are often charged with serving on various committees, campus initiative, and basically serving as an advocate for both their colleagues and students (Jones & Williams, 2006). This is in addition to serving as mentors. Being that Black faculty have familiarity with being in these students' positions, they are often burdened with larger advising and mentoring responsibilities than their peers (Griffin, 2012; Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Patton & Harper, 2003; Umbach, 2006; Williams & Williams, 2006). This cultural taxation may benefit the institutions of the faculty as it provides a façade of diversity; however, the faculty are inevitably overwhelmed (Reddick & Pritchett, 2015; Reddick, Bukoski, Smith & Wasielewski, 2014; Padilla, 1994).

As a result, some PWIs use cross-race mentorship programs to help fill in the gaps of the Black faculty/staff to student ratio. For instance, TSU, a Central Texas college, established the Bobcat Bond Program (TSU, 2015). It pairs sophomore and



beyond students with mentors who may be faculty, staff or other students. These mentors serve as role models, advisors, and networking guides.

Also, White faculty members, who are mindful of the differences they may have with Black students, may still become mentors by identifying common ground in their backgrounds (Reddick & Pritchett, 2015). White faculty have been successful allies as they have understood the need to intentionally make the effort to reach out to Black students and allot time to talk about their personal lives in relation to academics (Reddick & Pritchett, 2015). Though there are some successful cross-race mentorships in PWIs, these institutions will still need to intentionally recruit Black faculty and staff as they are with the recruitment of African American students.

With a declining Black population within the Austin area that already had a low percentage of Black people, it would be useful to explore the type of relationships Black students have with Black faculty and staff during their college experience in Central Texas. With the addition of their contractual obligations, Black faculty must be able to develop meaningful relationships with their students as they may be the one of the few same-race people who may be able to support them along their college journey; this is in addition to the faculty navigating their own experiences of isolation and discriminatory acts within the PWIs (Griffin, 2012; Allen, 1985; Livingston & Stewart, 1987; Loo & Rollison, 1986; Person & Christensen, 1996).

### **Student Organizations**

Campus-based student organizations contribute to the personal development of students and their ability to engage and adapt in their respective college environments.

This ultimately helps leads to them being able to persist to completion. Astin (1984) found that students who were involved on campuses were more likely to have better time-management and have higher rates of retention. These higher rates of retention may be because of the beneficial learning opportunities that occur during their organizational involvement that researchers suggest should be meaningful and well balanced for the students development. Research suggests that students are more likely to have a fulfilling college experience leading to persistence when they are involved in campus activities (Brittian, Sy and Stokes, 2009; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Tinto, 2006/7; Woodard, Mallory, & De Luca, 2001). Underrepresented students increase their social and academic integration, improve academic outcomes, and developed a positive self-identity when they become involved in campus organizations (Bowman, Park & Denson, 2015; Baker, 2008; Guiffrida, 2003; Barajas and Pierce, 2001).

Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) study also found that the participating African American students involved in campus organizations had a higher sense of leadership and satisfactory perception of their college than those students who were not in organizations. Having leadership positions in these organizations contributed to their retention rates as they reported having a greater sense of responsibility to themselves and their college (Brittian et al., 2009). These traits are then compiled with their academic ability giving them a greater opportunity at persisting. Kuk and Manning (2010) suggested that organizations can help bridge academic gaps and be gateways for enhancing retention and persistence.

Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) found that Black students at HBCUs were involved in student organizations in general, such as ones directly related to their majors or religion. Although those attending PWIs were more likely to be involved in organizations designated for Black students to congregate and discuss matters related to them as Black students. Black student organizations increased in the 1960s and 1970s as more civil rights legislation provided access for Black students at PWIs; these organizations essentially were focused on cultural and political interests (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2015; Chang, 2002). As the racial/ethnic population on college campuses continue to become more diverse because of the increase in the changing national demographics so does the number of student organizations tailored to particular races and ethnicities. As a result, these organizations continue to be sources of support for those students of color who often feel disconnected from their college environments. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) argued that the ethnic identity fostered in these organizations bridged the cultural gap between the home and college environments of minority students. Black students being involved in Black student organizations that were based on academics/leadership, community activism, or social aspects were links between academic achievement and persistence at PWIs.

Guiffrida's (2003) study focused on identifying the ways that student organizations benefited Black students integration into social environments at PWIs. He found that these groups facilitated opportunities for students to connect with campus and community Black professionals who could become supportive mentors. These students were also able to participate in community service projects, allowing them to help local

minorities in the area. In Kniess, Havice and Cawthon's (2015) study, Black students indicated that in an effort to adjust to the initial culture shock of attending a PWI, they sought out peers who had similar values and were of the same race. These students were members in various organizations, including peer-mentoring programs. They credit returning back to college each semester because of the commitments they made to not only themselves, but the organization and the campus community. Being a part of cultural housing and Black sororities and fraternities benefit the Black students academically and support social development (Jones & Williams, 2006).

However, there are some researchers that have suggested that being involved in Black campus organizations may be problematic for students as they may subtract time from their academic responsibilities (Guiffrida & Douthtit, 2010). Others have also suggested that these types of organizations decrease the Black students opportunities to integrate by isolating them from the larger community of students. Members of the mainstream community may perceive it to be a sign that Black students do not want to integrate with the rest of the campus community (Jones & Williams, 2006; Stewart, 1997).

However, more research overwhelmingly argues that student organizations, whether Black-student focused or not, have proven to support the persistence of Black students at HBCUs and PWIs. They help Black students connect with their racial/ethnic communities, the campus-at-large, and the surrounding community (Bowman et al., 2015).

More research concerning the activity of Black students in non-Black focused organizations would provide a better understanding of the multitude of types of connectivity these students value, whether it's related to degree majors or other sources of inclusion that help them connect to their college environments. Also, it is also helpful to explore if African American students still view Black organizations as a primary retention source, and if so, why are they still much needed on college campuses, especially PWIs.

### **Persistence Barriers**

Black students in higher education institutions encounter many forms of barriers that become obstacles during their college journey. These barriers often cause this student population to persist at a slower rate or withdraw from institutions. This section will review some of the main barriers for Black students enrolled in colleges in Central Texas.

#### **Academic Disadvantage**

Unfortunately, being academically prepared is often one of the major barriers to Black student persistence. Lavin and Crook's 1990 study found that minority students were less academically prepared, and as a result, they left college without a degree in higher proportions than White students (Carter, 2006). "Racial and ethnic differences in college completion are often attributed to factors related to socioeconomic background and primary and secondary school experiences" (Baker & Robnett, 2012, p. 325). As a result, the lack of academic preparation is often a consequence of African American students not being educated through a college-preparatory curriculum. These students

often lack resources and have poor quality teachers who do not prepare them academically.

A study by Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2004) examined a tracking system for minorities in high schools and found that those students who were identified as intelligent were given the resources needed to be successful in college (Carter, 2006). These students were provided with mentors and taken to tour colleges while other students, typically minority students, were given a limited amount of assistance with their post-high school educational plans (Carter, 2006).

Unfortunately, this study found what often occurs in low-income, minority schools. Students are not encouraged to fill out college applications or determine college majors. Most of them also have never been on a college campus, so they do not have an idea about college choice selection. They are also not prepared for the level of coursework that they are expected to satisfy. In most cases, their parents are often oblivious to these matters as well. As a result, if minority students do enroll in college, they do not persist, and if they do persist, it takes them more time to adjust and complete the academic requirements for their undergraduate degrees (Carter, 2006).

As noted, minority students, including Blacks, are often products of impoverished schools and isolated in inferior programs (Laird et al., 2007; Garcia, 2001). A study by O'Brien and Zudak (1998) reported that minorities are given inadequate resources, if any, during their pre-college schooling because they often live in financially segregated neighborhoods (Laird et al., 2007). These students are often at a technological disadvantage on college campuses; as a result, they are not as knowledgeable about

computers or other tools needed in the academic arena. These neighborhoods and schools are more likely composed of a high concentration of low socioeconomic, minorities (Laird et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2003). Black students, especially, are at a great disadvantage as most of them often attend low-performing schools and are not exposed to college preparatory curriculums; this causes them to not be academically ready for their postsecondary education (Laird et al., 2007).

Over the last two decades, researchers have suggested that implementing pre-college academic testing and promoting transference from two-year institutions to four-year institutions would help Black students persist (Carter, 2006). Enrolling in two-year institutions would allow further academic preparation preceding their high school education. This will give them additional time to develop the skills needed to be successful in college. Community colleges provide more learning outlets to help the students progress in college, including offering many sections of developmental education courses. In fact, Black students are often not only required to enroll in developmental writing, reading and math courses, but they are placed in the lowest-level of remediation courses (Hodges, Simpson, & Stahl, 2012).

Developmental education (DEVED), commonly composed of multiple levels of writing, reading and math, began in the 1960s to serve students considered underprepared for college-level instruction (Center for Community College Student Engagement National Report (CCCSE), 2016). These courses help improve the academic skills of underprepared students who were victims of K-12 system failures (SEF, 2012). Although developmental education courses are needed by a wide range of students from various

academic and social backgrounds; consequently, the majority of those required to take these courses attended typically Black, Latino, low-income, and/or first-generation college students who attended secondary schools that lacked the funding and resources to adequately prepare them for their college experiences (SEF, 2012).

Opponents of developmental education programs contend that students who have to enroll in these courses should not be admitted to college as their academic skills are not substantial enough to manage college-level coursework (Attewell et al., 2006; Harwood, 1997; Marcus, 2000; Trombley, 1998). Some opponents of DEVED have even suggested that some colleges have lowered their admissions standards and academic curriculum criteria to give underprepared students an opportunity to attend college (Attewell et al., 2006; Bennet, 1994; MacDonald, 1997, 1998, 1999; Traub, 1995). Critics also argue that developmental education gives academically weak students the false hope of graduating from universities, further proven by the statistics that show that many lose confidence and withdraw after taking multiple deved courses (Attewell et al., 2006; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Rosenbaum, 2001). As a result, some people argue that deved should be completely removed from four-year institution curriculum and only remain in community colleges for those students needing remediation (Attewell et al., 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2004; Kozieracki, 2002; Soliday, 2002).

Due to accountability issues regarding student progression in DEVED, there has been a concerted effort to use multiple measures for assessment and placement versus one test to measure students' learning abilities as well as lessening the number of classes in the DEVED sequence of remediation. In fact, the American Association of Community



Colleges has asserted that institutions double the rate of students who complete developmental education programs and then transition and complete their college-level gatekeeper courses by 2020 (CCCSE National Report, 2016). However, community colleges cannot be the only type of institutions to serve underprepared students. If 16 to 40% of incoming, underprepared students were denied admission to four-year colleges, many of these institutions would not be sustainable because of the decrease of courses and services they would need to offer as underprepared students represent a large portion of incoming freshman classes on many campuses (Boylan, 2001). Most colleges would not be able to enroll a substantial amount of academically prepared students alone to continue to employ faculty, staff and administrators.

40% of traditional undergraduate students take at least one developmental education course; in fact, these courses are fairly common among nontraditional students (Attewell et al., 2006; Woodham, 1998). Approximately 22% of four-year university freshman in Texas enroll in at least one developmental education course when entering college, and approximately 20% of these students eventually complete their DEVED studies and earn their undergraduate degrees within six years (UT Dana Center, 2007). In 2018, more than 40% of the undergraduates in public TX colleges were not considered college-ready (THECB, 2019).

Texas' fall 2008 cohort of first-time, full-time undergraduates included those who have graduated or are persisting after six years who either required or did not require DEVED courses (THECB, 2014). At the UTA, 62.2% graduated and 5.9% persisted in the group that required DEVED courses. Out of those not requiring DEVED courses,

84.4% graduated (THECB, 2014). For fall 2018 at UTA, 38.3% of students were enrolled in developmental math in a corequisite model, along with 40% in reading/writing developmental courses (THECB, 2020). The majority of these students were Black students.

During the 2006-2007 fiscal year, approximately \$206 million in General Revenue Funds were appropriated by the Texas Legislature for the purpose of instructional cost of developmental education at all state public institutions of higher learning (UT Dana Center, 2007). In 2005 the average cost per DEVED semester credit hour was \$164 million statewide and \$256 million at Texas public universities. In 2005, while 90% of DEVED hours were offered by community colleges, the total cost per semester hour was 68% higher at universities than community colleges (UT Dana Center, 2007).

Addressing the needs of students needing remediation has become a high priority for the THECB as it is one of the greatest challenges within the higher education system of Texas (THECB, 2014). In 2010, the state of Texas launched an initiative to revamp developmental education in an effort to reform an academic system failing underprepared students (THECB, 2011). Developmental Education Demonstration Projects (DEDPs) are focused on several goals, including advising, monitoring student success and accelerating completion. Several Central Texas universities, including TSU and the UTA, were awarded funds and given the opportunity to design best practices to help increase persistence through academic success. The 2013-2017 Statewide Developmental Education Plan (2012) provides that institutions help underprepared students by means of

comprehensive support services and using nontraditional methods such as integrated instructional methods. It also calls for colleges to address the student persistence of first-time-in-college (FTIC) students by assessing their cognitive and noncognitive issues that may affect their academic performances.

By fall 2017, the THECB plans to take on and significantly improve remediation by restructuring assessment tools, advising and placement standards and providing more accelerated instructional strategies within institutions. Meeting these improvements requires institutions making extensive and systematic changes that have them using their faculty, tutors and support staff in the most efficient way. It has been noted that students who are placed in developmental education classes are less likely to persist in college compared to those entering directly into college-credit coursework (THECB, 2014; Burdman, 2012). The accelerated instructional strategies that were mandated in the fall of 2015 included integrating reading and writing for exit level courses, providing noncourse competency based options (NCBO) in each content area and mainstreaming developmental education students by co-enrolling them in college-credit courses (THECB, 2014). The Developmental Education Program Survey (DEPS) 2014 found that 66% of Texas institutions are offering the mainstreaming option in mathematics, with more than 50% of colleges providing this option in reading and writing for underprepared students. For instance, ACC, which serves many of the students who transfer to Central Texas universities, integrated its Developmental Writing and Reading courses, increased its NCBO options, and created paired course options to help usher more students into the

mainstream and contextualize their studies. For instance, students are now able to enroll and earn credit for developmental writing and English composition.

The allocation of resources and cost expenditures will also need to be reevaluated to revitalize student assessment so that it becomes an individualized approach that is based on both the student's strengths and needs. The new TSI Assessment (TSIA) categorizes students with first through eighth grade knowledge and skills levels as Adult Basic Education (ABE) and those with skill levels at the ninth through twelfth levels as Developmental Education (DE) (THECB, 2014). With the individual student profile assessments, institutions will be able to better serve this population by providing various academic programs, such as traditional classroom models or noncourse competency-based options. With appropriate advising/support, these students will be placed in the workforce, continuing education and academic programs that are suited for their individual needs. DEPS 2014 (THECB, 2014) reported that 85% of institutions are using students' prior academic and workplace experiences, noncognitive factors and high school metrics, in addition to their TSI Assessment placement scores in an effort to more properly, academically place students by using a holistic model rather than just placement scores.

Texas is aggressively taking on the task of increasing the persistence and completion rates of underprepared students by enhancing programmatic, research and instructional strategies that will not only support the students but also meet labor market goals for the area (THECB, 2014).

Minority-serving institutions (MSI) that have a history of enrolling low-income students of color who are often inadequately prepared support these students using comprehensive DEVED programs (SEF, 2012). Since minority-serving institutions have a history of admitting low-income students of color who are inadequately prepared, they often have comprehensive DEVED programs in place to support student academics (SEF, 2012). In fact, 34% of Hispanics and half of the Black student population who earned baccalaureate degrees were previously enrolled in DEVED courses (Attewell, Lavin, Domina & Levey, 2006). MSIs play a major role in reforming DEVED in four-year colleges as they have a long-standing in supporting students needing remedial education courses and helping them persist to degree completion; however, they are often left out of DEVED reform debates and discourse (SEF, 2012).

Proponents argue that developmental education is a necessary educational component as many students can be successful in college courses by combining their basic academic weaknesses with their strengths in subject areas; also, there are some nontraditional students that need to rebuild basic skills that may have diminished in the gap of years between high school and college (Attewell et al., 2006). Those people who support DEVED programs view criticism of them as a standing barrier on college access for all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic backgrounds; with these students absent from four-year institutions, it greatly reduces the number of them who earn a bachelor's degree (Attewell et al., 2006; Lavin & Weininger, 1998). Students attending MSIs, especially, will be greatly affected if DEVED programs are decreased and/or eliminated. MSIs, then, must advocate on their behalf for states to support and protect

DEVED programs by connecting the usefulness of these programs to the national degree completion of underprepared students at MSI's (SEF, 2012).

One of the most important findings in the study found that 50% of Black college graduates graduated after taking remedial courses. Without these programs, these minority students would not have earned a degree. These courses serve as gatekeepers. Those who successfully complete the courses go on to credit-courses, and the others withdraw or are academically terminated from their colleges. DEVED programs function as a "second-chance policy and partly as a form of institutional quality control" as they confront and find techniques to address poor academic skills instead of allowing the damage to remain irreversible (Attewell et al., 2006, p. 916). DEVED programs help eliminate social inequities by providing minority students, who are disproportionately lacking in effective academic preparation, an opportunity to attempt to acquire a higher education degree (Atwell et al., 2006).

Black students are more likely to be academically underprepared and experience difficulties in the classroom during their collegiate journey, and these academic difficulties often persist after their first year of being enrolled in college (Walpole, 2008; D'Augelli & Hershberger 1993). Though Black women enrolled at PWIs were found to have more intellectual skills than those of the same racial group at HBCUs (Walpole 2008; Fleming 1984), it was found that Black women have a more difficult time academically transitioning at PWIs than males in this race of students (Walpole, 2008; Allen & Haniff, 1991).

Though the majority of Black students enrolled in college are enrolled at predominately white institutions, including those Black students in Central Texas, they often have lower grade point averages at these institutions versus those Black students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Walpole et al., 2008). This may be because of the fact that Black students are more likely to persist when the curriculum, pedagogy and activities are related to their cultural interests (Laird et al., 2007). As a result, institutions, especially historically white universities, must continue to implement programs that provide the resources to help assist Black students with their educational needs, including a curriculum that is better suited to their learning abilities or relatable to their economic backgrounds (Laird et al., 2007). Universities in Central Texas would greatly enhance the learning experiences of their students by sharing the pedagogical tools used in its local HBCU to help the majority of its Black students, who are enrolled in area PWIs. Huston-Tillotson's First-Year Program that systematically encompasses academic and service projects that are purposefully focused on the plight of Black nationally and locally would be a great asset in terms of creating programs. This type of program, along with the existing student academic support services at HBCUs and PWIs, can possibly cause a growth in student academic interest leading to higher persistence rates.

Although the majority of the research points to being academically underprepared as the key factor in Black students not being successful in their course work, it would be advantageous to explore the students' ability to use key academic resources on college campuses. Central Texas colleges have many student support services to help students

with their academic shortcomings, so it would be helpful to research the students use of these resources and their opinions about the effects on their learning outcomes and ability to persist.

### **Financial Obligations**

Minority students often have obligations that distract them from their academics such as family responsibilities that may include financial support and employment commitments. These off-campus responsibilities often have a negative effect on their college success (Baker & Robnett, 2012). Low-income students are often less likely to enroll in college, and if they do enroll, they are still less likely to graduate because of high tuition costs. As a result of rising tuition and fees, Black students tend to have more financial aid and student loan assistance than Whites, Asians and Hispanics (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013; Cunningham & Santiago, 2008; St. John, Paulsen & Carter, 2005).

Though used as a source to help need-based minority students persist, financial aid provisions still do not completely close the disparity gap (Alon, 2011). As a result, many Black students who are financially disadvantaged often enroll at Historically Black Colleges and Universities because of their reputations to help these students be successful in college (Allen, 1992). These postsecondary institutions often have a greater understanding of these students' backgrounds. These students' parents are often single-parents, employed at lower status jobs, and earning less because of a lack of higher education (Allen, 1992). However, HBCUs have recently been placed in difficult, sometimes irreversible, financial turmoil that may be a consequence of trying to alleviate financial strains for its students.



Fortunately, financial aid awards have been found to contribute to a student's ability to complete college, and the U.S. government is continually developing new policies to help with higher education costs, especially for minority students (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Astin 1993; Berger 2000, 2001-2002; Berger & Milem, 2000). This is fortunate as financial aid has a huge effect on college persistence. For financially constrained students, it decreases some of the burden of tuition costs and other necessary college fees (Alon, 2011). It helps students redirect their focus to academic activities rather than working long hours to pay for college.

By lowering economic barriers for low-income students, financial aid can well. (Guiffrida, 2005, p. 5) promote the year-to-year persistence and college graduation likelihood of these students. This policy can, therefore, diminish economic disparities in the attainment of a degree and curb the reproduction of economic inequality. (Alon, 2011, pp. 808)

In Central Texas, the average tuition and fees is over \$10,000 (THECB, 2019). The average student debt for students is \$23,242, with 43.5% of students bearing this amount of debt. Even with the use of grants and work-study, students still need on average almost \$6,000 more to attend public universities in Texas to cover additional fees, such as textbook access fees, other supplies, and transportation.

Financial Aid labels students based on four categories: 'Basic Needy Students,' "Needy Students Using Aid in Part to Replace Family Contribution," "Students Who Received No Aid," and "Students Who Applied for and Received only Merit or Performance-Based Aid" (THECB, 2011). Unfortunately, loans are still needed and used by each group to finance their educational goals. 76% receiving aid in Texas were "Basic Needy Students" who received the majority of grant funding distributed, 56%, but they

still accounted for 43% of student loans, over \$2 billion dollars. Therefore, even with a large amount of grant monies, students still needed to rely on loans to supplement their educational needs. Black students often fall into this category, both nationally and statewide, including those in Central Texas institutions.

Moreover, there are some Black students in Central Texas who may be categorized in the group needing loans to replace family contribution. Over 80% of the students who are a part of moderate-income families, earning \$60,000 or more, still used almost \$2 billion in loans. Unfortunately, students from low-income and moderate middle-class households still may not be able to meet all their financial requirements even though they may exhaust all the available grants and loans (Alon, 2011; Long & Riley, 2007). Unfortunately, these loans accumulate annual debts while these students continue college. After graduating, they have to use any savings they have to repay the loans, thus continuing the added financial pressures on them (Alon, 2011). The reliance on these loans increases their debt burdens as they are more susceptible to the credit consequences if they default on them (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013).

In addition, there are students who are labeled as “Needy” who do not receive financial aid because of issues, such as not completing the application (THECB, 2011). This may be because of the students and their families not understanding the application and/or process, especially those first-generation students. Some of these students may not receive aid because they failed to meet academic progress or did not take enough course hours to qualify for the financial assistance. This could be attributed to their need to balance college with employment obligations.

Black students are often products of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, so the majority of the time these are the students that must find supplemental employment while in college. They are often financially responsible for their college expenses. Because of this responsibility, they may spend a significant amount of time working a part-time or full-time job, which affects their ability to be effective and fulfill their college requirements (Baker & Robnett, 2012). Institutions need to implement policies and provide low-income students with sufficient financial resources; if so, college success rates may become more equalized (Alon, 2011). Black students in Central Texas colleges may then be able to persist at the same rate as other racial populations on campus without the added responsibility of balancing work and academic responsibilities.

It would be valuable to have more insight into the financial aid process and college choice among Central Texas Black students. Some students may have chosen the best college to get the most income gain at completion but did not factor in the amount of money they would need to pay for their college experience. When these students are overwhelmed by having to work and study, they sometimes withdraw from college, so it would be beneficial to explore this more in depth with Black students in this area of tremendous prosperity and economic growth.

### **Social Integration**

Along with academic struggles, Black students often have problems integrating into the campus environment. This is particularly likely at traditionally White institutions: “African American students experience exclusion, racial discrimination, and alienation on predominantly white campuses” (Carter, 2006, p. 39; Allen, 1992; Turner, 1994).

These students develop anxiety as they are often times the only one or one of few African Americans in the campus environment, including the classrooms (Carter, 2006).

On campuses at predominately white institutions, Blacks often encounter barriers to their success such as negative racial/ethnic climates (Laird et al., 2007; Hurtado et al., 1999). Minority students have reported feeling invisible and felt there was discrimination from their peers and other members in their respective college communities (Baker and Robnett, 2012). In a 1996 study by Feagin, Vera and Imani, students expressed not being viewed as individuals with “distinctive talents, virtues, interests, and problems” (Carter, 2006, p. 39). As a result, many African American students often seek out peers and faculty of the same ethnicity or race as a form of support. It is important for Blacks enrolled at PWIs to not only have support from their families and faculty/administration but to also find sub-cultures that assist in their persistence (Laird et al., 2007). Black students who have adapted coping mechanisms for the racism they encounter on campus are more likely to be successful compared to those who do not adapt (Boylan et al., 2005; Sedlacek, 1987; Fleming, 1984). Many students rely on Black Student Centers and other support networks to develop coping skills that allow them to function as a part of their college environments (Jones & Williams, 2006; Fleming, 1984). As a result, the administration at PWIs must continue to create support systems that focus on student engagement for Black students.

Centered in Austin, the university also has to contend with the fact that not only is its internal environment lacking a large Black population, but its external environment of this population is declining as well. As a result, these institutions have to actively

promote inclusiveness and commit to diverse student engagement. Students are more actively engaged in their education, and consequently gain more from their experiences when they are at institutions that they perceive as inclusive and affirming and where performance expectations are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels (Laird et al., 2007, p. 40; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were created to educate Black students and for many years were the only sources for this racial group to attain a higher education because of explicit segregation laws. As a result, these campuses were designed and remain well-equipped in preparing its students for collegiate success through support systems (Laird et al., 2007). Research has found that HBCUs are more educationally beneficial as they have opportunities and activities that focus on these students' cultural interests and helps them build social support networks. If predominately white institutions continue to implement some of these techniques, it will continue to be helpful for the persistence of Black students so that they are successful on all types of college campuses. Being a part of institutions that are insensitive to the cultures of Black students only put these students at greater risk of withdrawing (Jones & Williams, 2006).

Regarding Central Texas Black students, it would be valuable to explore the length of time these students gave themselves to adapt into their college environments. With a low Black population on most Central Texas college campuses and their surrounding areas, it would help for the UTA to know what type of resources and

programming are needed and how quickly resources need to be set in place to help these students persist and eventually return the proceeding semester.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model and Theory of Involvement**

Alexander Astin's 1985 input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model and theory of involvement is one of the most highly regarded college impact models (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). College outcomes are perceived as functions of three sets of elements in this model; the elements include inputs, environment and outcomes. The inputs set includes the "demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and academic and social experiences that students bring to college" (p. 53). The "full range of people, programs, policies, cultures and experiences that students encounter in college, whether on or off campus" is the environment set (p. 53). Finally, the outcomes set consist of "the students' characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors as they exist in college" (p. 53). For Black students, pre-entry characteristics, environment and outcomes of behaviors play a large role in their ability to persist as these factors could present as barriers during their college careers.

This conceptual approach is used in studies that attempt to explain the influential environmental effects on student change or growth while at their respective institutions; the factors focused on are the ones that faculty and administrators are able to exert and have some type of programmatic and policy control (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). "Administrators and faculty must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice ... can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they

devote to academic pursuits” (Astin, 1999, p. 523). These policies may include class schedules and attendance, academic probation, participation in honors courses and policies on student orientation, advising and faculty office hours. These are important as Black students often require assistance understanding institutional concepts.

Administrative decisions concerning nonacademic issues can also directly affect how students use their time and energy. These may include factors such as residency policies, the regularity of cultural events, and financial aid possibilities such as on-campus employment opportunities. These factors are also detrimental to the success of Black students as they learn to adapt to their environments.

Astin’s theory of involvement helps explain how students grow and allows “higher education’s purpose to be one of talent development” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2002, p. 53). This theory has five basic claims. The first is that “involvement requires the investment of psychological and physical energy in objects of one sort or the another, and the second is “involvement is a continuous concept” (p. 53). The third is that “involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features” (p. 53).

The fourth postulate states that “the amount of learning or development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement” (p. 53). Astin suggests that while college administrators are preoccupied with trying to accumulate and allocate fiscal resources, they should recognize that the most valuable institutional resource can be considered student time (Astin, 1999). The theory of student involvement suggests that the students’ involvement and dedication to the institution’s curriculum is needed to achieve its intended effects. In other words, the intended learning and development is

based on the students' sufficient effort and energy invested in the curriculum, they must be active participants in the learning process to achieve the maximum output effects. Black students are more successful academically when they are engaged in the learning process and feel integrated into their environments.

The fifth and final part of the theory is that "educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to its capacity to induce student involvement" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Astin, 1985). Institutional environments are critical roles in student development as they serve as a means of academic and social opportunities in that they introduce students to new people and experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It is the students' responsibility to capitalize and actively engage in the institutional resources.

The student involvement theory states that highly involved and successful students devote considerable energy to studying, spending time on campus, participating in student organizations and interacting with faculty and students (Astin, 1999). For Black students to feel a part of the environment and not isolated, it is important for them to interact and become involved with their peers. Astin argued that the most potent forms of positive involvement with student outcomes is the students' involvement with academics, faculty and student peers (Berger & Milem, 1999). Davis (1991) found that Black students who were involved in organized activities and had interactions with both their peers and faculty had a lower dropout rate than those who did not have this level of institutional involvement. This interaction and involvement on historically Black college campuses may be easily accessible and attained; however, it is important to note that this same level may be difficult to achieve on predominantly White campuses for this



underrepresented population. However, it is just as significant to their success on these campuses as well. Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) also found that Black students who were involved at PWIs in academic/social organizations, faculty/peer interactions and campus employment were more likely to persist and be integrated into the community (Berger & Milem, 1999).

### **Tinto's Theory of Student Departure**

Tinto's theory of student departure focuses on the various characteristics that students enter college with that ultimately play a role in the college departure process (Braxton, 2000). Family background factors, individual attributes and pre-college schooling experiences compose the student entry characteristics. Family background factors may include the students' parents socioeconomic status, educational level and expectations (Braxton, 2000). These factors are significant to Black students as many of these students originate from families of the lower socioeconomic class that often do not produce a great number of college graduates. Therefore, their ability to provide financial support and advice regarding being successful in college lessens in comparison to other races of students, leading to a higher probability of students not persisting to their expected graduation dates. Although the families of Black students may have a high level of expectation for the students, as they are the first or one of few to attend college, can be a motivational tool, the other factors aforementioned still impact the students' ability to persist.

Race, gender and academic preparedness are the individual attributes, and the pre-college schooling experiences include the students' academic achievement in their

secondary schools. These entry characteristics not only directly affect the students' ability to commit and set of goal to graduate, but they also affect departure because "initial commitment to an institution and to the goal of graduation in turn affects the student's degree of integration into the academic and social systems of the college or university" (Braxton, 2000, pp. 2). For students who are Black at predominantly White institutions, their very race causes barriers within their campus and classroom environments as they must maneuver the identity of being college students and the other issues that they are confronted with because of their race. Also, most of the students, despite the type of college preparatory high schools they graduated from before attending college, have found to be academically underprepared, and thus, they must learn their newly presented academic curriculum while also filling in the educational gap by learning the material that was not accessible to them before beginning college. Again, this external factor further creates barriers and sets the stage for departure.

Though similar to Astin's interactional model of institutional impact, Tinto's theory explicitly explains the withdrawal process of college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The initial dispositions and intentions that students enter college with are continuously modified as a result of the interactions students have in the academic and social systems at their institutions. These modifications are then intensified because of the family, friends and other commitments that place demands on students. Integration into the institutional system is vital to student persistence. "Integration is the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership

in that community or in subgroups of it” (pp. 54). Positive interaction strengthens the students’ ability to persist because of their commitment to not only their personal goals but the institution as well; however, negative interaction leads to early withdrawal from college as it distances the students from the institutions’ communities. Students are more likely to persist until degree completion when their experiences are satisfactory (Tinto, 2012). Not fitting into the communities causes the students to feel like outcasts as they feel they are at odds with the university. Isolation is just as damaging as incongruence to persistence as the students feel absent from the daily occurrences of the institution. Whereas incongruence occurs because of the student’s evaluation of interactions, isolation deals with the absence of the interactions.

Black students face incongruence and isolation as they often have difficulty identifying and becoming a member of a supportive community (Tinto, 2012). Sometimes, these students are members of institutions that do not have a critical mass of students who share similar backgrounds and interests. Even if they encounter those of the same racial origin, it still does not guarantee that a supportive community can be formed as they may not have the same commonalities. As a result, students of color are more likely to experience isolation and/or incongruence than white students as they have fewer supportive community options.

Academic performance is also an essential factor for student persistence. However, because of students experiencing academic difficulties and not meeting standards, many of them withdraw from college. This form of student departure may be voluntary as some students choose to avoid being seen as a failure while other students

are forced to leave by their institutions (Tinto, 2012). Although Tinto asserts that the correlation between academic failures and high school performance is not great, he does support the findings that poor academic performance is frequently related to poor high school preparation. Attending a low-quality high school contributes to the lack of the development of study habits and study skills.

Black students are more likely to attend public schools where the grading policies are less rigorous than private schools, causing them to be underprepared for their collegiate academic demands (Tinto, 2012). However, poor academic performance at predominately white institutions can also be because of lack of support Black students encounter in their institutions' classrooms and offices (Tinto, 2012; Martin, 1990; Fleming, 1985).

Tinto also presents finances as a persistence factor in his student departure theory. The impact of finances as factor of student persistence occurs as early as the students' decisions to attend their colleges of choice (Tinto, 2012; Jackson & Weathersby, 1975; Jackson, 1978; Cabrera et al., 1990). Not only do finances affect college choice, they affect and shape the decisions the students must make while attending college (Tinto, 2012). Financial obligations may lead students to obtaining part-time employment; as a result, they must modify their academic participation abilities to accommodate their financial needs. Having to obtain employment also decreases their time spent on campuses fostering their interactions with their institutions' faculty and peers (Tinto, 2012; Cabrera et al., 1992).

Financial need may also cause students to alter their willingness to persist early in their college careers (Tinto, 2012). When college graduation is still distant and met with uncertainty, students may decide to depart. Whereas when the costs of college have already been accumulating and graduation is possible, their ability to persist may be stronger. Financial needs often contribute to students departing college, but there are some students who will accept the financial burden and debt as they tie their college completion to their adult futures.

Tinto's theory states that college completion is more likely to occur if students link their valued goals to their degree attainment (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Fortunately, researchers have found that African American students who attend PWIs have higher career goals (Walpole, 2008; Allen & Haniff 1991; Jackson & Swan 1991). As a result, they are academically more successful than less driven students. They are able to correlate their future earnings to their present academic workload. Due to being enrolled in PWIs, these students also often garner higher incomes because of their access to networks those students at HBCUs may not have encountered (Walpole, 2008; Braddock & McPartland 1988; Bowen & Bok 1998). This is beneficial for Blacks as their access to social capital is expanded, thereby giving them more opportunity to achieve success after college. Being around these connections while in college also motivates them to complete their studies as they now are able to visualize themselves in their career fields.

Most Black students were more likely to focus on the economic benefits of their education in terms of helping not only themselves but their families as well. They also

focused on the services they could provide and supply their communities once their education was completed (Walpole, 2008; Hamilton 1996).

One of the most widely accepted and noted theories on student educational persistence is Vincent Tinto's theory of college student departure. Tinto asserts that when students successfully integrate into their institutions they are less likely to withdraw from school and/or perform unsatisfactorily in their academics (Baker & Robnett, 2012). As a result, it is important that institutions realize that an essential part of students adapting into their environments is through the support of the colleges' faculty, campus groups and institutional resources (Baker & Robnett, 2012). Students tend to persist when they have both positive academic and social experiences in their campus environment (Peltier et al., 1999).

### **Conclusion**

The exploration of Black students' ability to persist in Central Texas colleges and universities will assist in helping institutions design and implement initiatives that will help its students and surrounding communities. Though this underrepresented and underprepared population of students is often met with academic, social and financial barriers, there are still some success indicators that can be used to support this group. Creating and funding more programs that provide more financial aid, mentors and involvement opportunities are several meaningful ways to encourage persistence. Research has shown that when the needed resources are provided, the participation, persistence and completion rates of Black students in Central Texas universities increase and demonstrate the beneficial effects of a college education



## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter introduces the qualitative design and phenomenological approach that was used for this study. It also presents the descriptions of the sample and settings, methods of participant recruitment and data collection, data instruments and measurements to ensure their validity. This chapter also includes the theoretical framework to be used for this study.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of senior-level, undergraduate Black students with impending graduation dates enrolled at the UTA. It explored the barriers that predicted their inability to persist in college and the factors that supported their ability to persist from registration to graduation.

### **Research Questions**

The study will address the following questions:

1. How do senior-level Black students at UTA with impending graduation dates describe their college knowledge prior to enrolling?
2. How do senior-level Black students at UTA with impending graduation dates make meaning of the barriers they encountered during their college experience?
3. How do senior-level Black students at UTA with impending graduation dates make meaning of the supporting factors that assisted them in their ability to persist?



## **Research Method and Design**

This study used a phenomenological approach to describe the lived experiences of Black students in Central Texas universities and their ability to persist. Phenomenology “focuses on the subjectivity and relativity of reality, continually pointing out the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them” (Willis, 2007, p.107). Phenomenologists are able to decipher the difference between what humans perceive versus what is actual reality (Willis, 2007). It essentially studies the perception people have of the world.

Phenomenological research is “based upon descriptions of experiences as they occur in everyday life by persons from all walks of life” (Willis, 2007, p. 173; Giorgi, 1995;). Data is obtained through interviews, written responses to research questions and through follow-up interviews (Willis, 2007). The data is then “systematically and methodically analyzed so that the implicit or explicit psychological meanings contained in them can be identified or made explicit and organized to reveal the underlying psychological structures” (Willis, 2007, p. 173).

The phenomenological method was appropriate for this research study as it focused on the experiences of the UTA Black senior-level undergraduate students to explore the students’ individual perspectives. Using this method, this study captured a variety of perspectives because of the diversity of the Black undergraduate students in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds and their differing perspectives of this one institution that they are enrolled in for their postsecondary education. However, a limit to the study was that it was not intended to represent all Black senior-level students enrolled

in Central Texas universities, just the selected individuals for this study and their experiences at UTA.

This study employed qualitative research. Qualitative research “accepts multiple sources of influence” and “expects multiple perspectives and seeks them” (Willis, 2007, p. 215). It uses “multiple sources of data” and “emphasizes participatory research” (Willis, 2007, p. 216). It is appropriate to determine the students’ ability to persist is appropriate for qualitative research as its main focus is to “explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 7). Through the use of qualitative research, the students’ identified factors that support or discourage persistence were captured through contact with them to explore their perspectives.

### **Population and Sample**

A purposive selection strategy was used to select the setting and participants of this study. The eleven participants, eight women and three men, were Black senior-level undergraduates enrolled in their senior year of college at UTA with impending graduation dates. All of these students were top-ranked in their high schools, and they had also integrated into the campus community by being actively involved in student organizations.

The institution is a large, top tier-one historically White, large research university ranked among the top forty colleges in the nation. The site was chosen as a means of gathering information about Black student experiences regarding the campus culture and

its surrounding environment as the university recently activated a plan to recruit and retain Black students.

UTA is within the Austin MSA with a fall 2020 enrollment of approximately 45% minorities, with 5.3% representing the Black student population. This institution was chosen as it is ranked the highest among Central Texas universities and located in one of the highest ranked cities in the United States because of its economic growth and quality of education. With its expanding surrounding communities of various races, but declining Black community population, the city of Austin's setting is similar to the population structure of UTA's campus, thus creating parallel external and internal environments for the student participants. This is an important factor as research shows that both the college campus, itself, and the environment outside of campus impact student success.

Recruitment of students proved to be a difficult task as students were no longer living nor attending classes and other social activities on campus because of COVID-19 restrictions in the state. As a result, all recruitment efforts were done via emails through a network of campus divisions geared towards diversity, campus cultural centers, student organizations, and specialized minority institutions/programs to ensure campus wide representation and to foster diversity of the student perspectives. Also, selecting students through these methods allowed varying socioeconomic backgrounds to be represented in the group.

Due to external environmental circumstances not allowing in-person recruitment, snowballing became a major source and used technique to recruit additional students after

interviewing an initial number of students. Snowballing occurs when the researcher asks interviewees for recommendations of other individuals to study (Creswell, 2008). This proved to be highly effective when recruiting students at UTA as there was not a direct link of familiarity between the Black student population and me, the researcher. Not having any prior experience as an employee or former undergraduate student at UTA did indeed prove to be a hardship when connecting with students.

COVID-19 effects also affected the participation rate of students who were the unit of analysis for this study as well, which was composed of eight Black female and three Black male undergraduate students in their senior year at UTA with pending May 2021 graduation dates. Interestingly enough, a couple of the obstacles affecting the persistence of the students explored in this study, also affected the participation rate for it. Initially, 18 students volunteered to participate; however, seven of them had to withdraw because of having to schedule more hours at work or having to work multiple jobs, because of the financial strain caused by losing an on-campus job. Also, some students withdrew because of having to devote more time to studying and preparing for midterm papers, projects, and exams because of flagging grades that were the effects of not being able to use learning resources, like tutors, and not adjusting to the online learning environment, including having access to their professor for office hours.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

This study relied on a collection of instruments to obtain data. A questionnaire created by the researcher was distributed to the participants as a means of gathering demographic and background data from the participants (See Appendix A). Interviews

also served as a data collection instrument for this study. Qualitative research often consists of the researcher creating questions and asking them to formulate data (Willis, 2007). Despite the chosen interview strategy, qualitative interviews often present tension among the “life world, interview situation, and analytic framework” (Willis, 2007, pg. 245; Mazeland, 1996;). For this study, interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility with unexpected emerging themes. Interviews had open-ended questions in relation to the participants’ experiences, perspectives and feelings. One interview averaging two hours, which included the preliminary questions, was completed. The conducted interview served as a form of developing a relationship with the participant who was being interviewed and gathering demographic and background information (See Appendix B). Questions included details about the participant’s background, with a focus on the participant’s high school years. The second, lengthier part of the interview focused on the study’s purpose of exploring the barriers and supporting factors of persistence the Black senior-level undergraduates experienced during their academic journey at UTA, the participants’ views about college, and the students’ perspective of the research topic (See Appendix C).

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and its potential to enhance upcoming Black undergraduates’ ability to be successful in college by means of a consent form sent to their email and by verbal agreement done virtually. The consent form also made them aware that all personal information would be protected by a given pseudonym. One interview, averaging two hours, was conducted with all the individuals to collect data that helped identify themes in the students’ homes and campus cultures

and their student experiences (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Unexpected emerging themes were also allowed to be discussed during the interviews.

Finally, a focus group was also conducted with seven students. Structured questions lead the focus groups, but flexibility was allowed as a means for students to dialogue about themes that unexpectedly emerged based on their student experiences. The participants discussed the supportive factors and barriers of persistence they encountered while attending UTA, including those not a part of the initial interview. The discussion also centered around the needed resources and policies that needed construction and/or revamping within UTA with the targeted population being Black students. Participants also shared their future educational goals and the effects they will have on them as individuals and within their families and communities. Moreover, the discussion was guided with three preformed questions determined by the researcher (See Appendix D).

As a college professor and former assistant department chair and academic advisor, the researcher has experience with Black students and the academic and social barriers that often prevent them from graduating, specifically those students who are academically underprepared. Also, the researcher has knowledge about these supporting factors and deterrents of persistence as a result of serving on various college committees and institutions as well as a state-wide board geared towards implementing these strategies to better serve Black students. As a result, the researcher was able to create questions that stimulated student discussion about college persistence and interviewed

participants, in both the individual and focus group session, to explore the research topic in depth.

The researcher has also taken graduate level courses as a means of preparing and doing qualitative research and has also conducted qualitative research studies using interviews and focus groups as a means of data collection. As a result, the researcher has experience researching and interviewing the demographic population being explored in this study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

This study followed the policies and procedures of the UTA's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The completed application and all supplemental materials were submitted by the researcher, with support from the faculty sponsor and department.

After IRB approval of study, the researcher was able to begin to collect data for the study with the student participants. The eleven students were senior-level Black undergraduates with impending graduation dates from UTA. Students' socioeconomic backgrounds consisted of all three classes, low-income, middle-class, and high-income households. The participants also had varying college preparatory school environments. The institutions were both low-income and high-income public schools, but there were varying types. Some of them were magnet, charter or career track preparatory high school environments. The majors of the students included pre-law, kinesiology, communications, business, pre-medical, computer science and engineering. The bulk of the student organizations the student participants were leaders and members of were

Black student focused, but there were some that were composed of the diverse student population.

The students were contacted via email to schedule interview dates and times based on the convenience of their schedules. The interviews were primarily given using Zoom, because of present day environmental conditions. Both the preliminary and research interview were combined to one sitting. The first part of the interview lasted from 15-20 minutes to establish a researcher/participant relationship, using the questions from the preliminary questionnaire that the students received to help the researcher obtain more information about the participant and his/her pre-college and college experiences. The second part of the interview averaged less than two hours, but was extended if the students wanted to discuss additional topics. The second part of the interview focused on the study's purpose and its exploratory questions.

The focus group session, including five women and two men, was also arranged by email and took place using the virtual tool of Zoom. It was scheduled for an hour, but it was lengthened to two hours because of the student participants engaging with each other and formulating an impromptu blueprint that would assist UT in being a more inclusive environment for Black students.

The focus group, composed of seven of the previous interviewees, had a mixture of students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, college preparatory environments, college majors, and student campus organizations. It began with the participants being asked questions to discuss the supportive factors and barriers, previously and not previously discussed in the one-on-one interviews. The students then discussed actions



that UT's administration needs to do to strengthen the supportive factors already established at the university and minimize the barriers that may present as obstacles to graduation for Black students.

A consent form was emailed to the participating students as well as read to them before the virtual interviews and the focus group sessions began. It explained that a pseudonym would be used so that there would not be any identifying information regarding the students and their personal experiences. All of the interviews and the focus group were recorded using the virtual video-conferencing tool, Zoom, with a secondary video recording device and note-taking as supplementary tools for capturing the data. Both the focus groups and interviews were recorded through visual footage, audio recordings and note taking. The information was stored using Dropbox and a USB drive. All of the recordings were transcribed and coded for data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model (I-E-O Model), which focuses on the input set of student traits; this includes those characteristics and preexisting experiences that students bring with them to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The environment consists of all the people, culture and programs that the students will encounter on their campuses, and the outcome details the knowledge and skills they have while enrolled. This model was used when analyzing the Black senior-level undergraduates' ability to interact and adapt to their campus communities, which included both their academic and social arenas. When analyzing the students negative and positive interactions regarding other students, professors, learning resources, such as

learning labs, it was helpful in capturing both the students' ability and inability to adapt in their classroom environments. This model served as a major tool when connecting the students' negative classroom experiences to their involvement with the curriculum and even being active learners in their classrooms as it served to be true that they do retreat mentally and academically when they encounter negative experiences. The model was also useful when analyzing the campus culture section as it explains how the regularity of cultural events can have the possibility of being either a negative and positive experience, thus affecting the students ability to adapt. The model also provided more insight into the importance of students having jobs on campus as they, too, help them form a connection to the institution.

The main usage of the model took place with the analysis of the students' family backgrounds and the pre-college academic and social experiences they brought with them to UTA. These Input factors, such as being academically underprepared and attending high schools that were dominantly attended by Black people affected their environment, which is the second part of the model. The lacking tools and experiences in both their academic and social arenas affected their ability to understand, adapt, and use those resources provided to them by the university. As a result, adding some negative effects to their outcome, the third part of the model, because of experiences and behaviors that they encountered.

Astin's Theory of Involvement further explores the level of student integration on their campuses and how this positively and negatively affects their ability to persist. This theory was also helpful in making the connections of the students' classroom

environment presenting as being with an obstacle or bridge to them being able to persist. It was especially crucial in analyzing how the positive interactions with peers in student organizations, mentors, and Black faculty/staff greatly improved their ability to become involved in the campus community, thus providing a stable basis for them to integrate and feel a sense of belonging at UTA. Because the students are in organizations, it connects them to not only their other peers, most evident other Black students, but the university itself. They have a sense of accountability to not only succeed with their peers and mentees, but also be present in helping the university expand programming through the organizations to help incoming Black undergraduates. Often times, these students relied on these student organizations as entities to help them with their negative experiences if they did not have mentors. In addition, the theory was effective in analyzing how not only did the achievement level raise for these students when having a Black faculty/staff, but they also developed a greater sense of self, thus feeling less like outcasts, eliminating those underlying feelings of isolation leading to mental health issues.

Tinto's Theory of Departure further provides insight as it suggests that students who have positive interaction are likely to commit to their educational goals and the institution (Tinto, 2012). However, those who experience negative encounters are more likely to withdraw and not complete their studies. This theory, then, serves as a beneficial framework to explore the students' ability to interact and adapt with their university community or isolate themselves because of feeling not a part of their campus' academic and social environments. This theory was used to analyze the students' family

background and pre-college academic settings effect on the Black undergraduates, but it was highly effective when understanding the withdrawals or attempted withdrawals of students who had difficulties integrating into the social system. Though these students eventually became involved with their campus community, in the beginning stages of their college entrance, adapting into the culture of a predominantly White institution did present issues that at some points seemed unresolvable. This concept was showcased majorly in the academic performance part of the theory. When analyzing the data, it was evident that those students who were struggling, especially those in developmental courses, had a higher rate of wanting to dismiss themselves from the environment, felt unsupported by professors and provided learning resources, causing them to rethink their decision to do their studies at UTA. The departure theory was also significant in connecting how the financial burdens increased the possibility of departure as low or nonexistent funds caused additional stress to those students who had to find employment, maintain grade averages for grants/scholarships while still wanting to remain in organizations that served as their safe spaces, and those students who had to rely on their already-financially stressed families.

These frameworks were thus both beneficial for analyzing the data for this study and understanding the multifaceted experiences and perspectives of participants regarding the supporting factors and barriers they encountered.

The transcribing of the data, both the individual interviews and the focus group material, began during the process by means of taking notes of the codes that were presenting themselves during the interviews and focus group discussion. After the data

was transcribed, it was then analyzed using descriptive coding. I began by highlighting similar topics in the same color, then further breaking down the data. This process involved grouping information by common topics and then assigning specific codes to them. For instance, data classified as Academic was then narrowed through additional coding to a specific group, such as Classroom, when led to it being identified as either a negative or positive experience. Once properly labeled, it was then decided what specific aspect of the classroom environment did it represent, such as encounters with professors. Then, if needed, it would be further broken down into negative encounters with professors regarding curriculum topics dealing with race. This axial coding allowed for the connection and linking of similar topics.

After realizing the coding needed further analysis to find those larger, thematic categories, I further dissected the highlighted data and created a second layer of coding. This then formed the major themes that emerged and became the data that helped introduce and form the major findings of the data.

The method triangulation was composed of the interviews, focus group, and the notetaking. Triangulation is used as a quality measurement of data collection, which prevents the researcher from “drawing unsupported conclusions from the data” (Willis, 2007, pg. 219). It serves as a means of confirming the study’s validity and credibility. As a result, the consistency of the data provides a more substantial foundation for the study’s findings. Using multiple sources for the understanding of theory, along with the participant interviews and the focus group decreased the bias level as the sources of data supported the findings of the data gathered through the developed interview questions.

After coding the data from the interviews and the focus group and then analyzing them thematically, there was the surprising realization that most of the students possessed the traits that were introduced in the theories, such as being able to adapt to diverse environments and excelling in college preparatory courses, that were supposed to be indicative of successful students, but they ultimately encountered the same barriers. This, then, caused me to be more receptive of the data that did not align with the existing theories as it was a cause of further exploration into the depths of these barriers.

### ***Summary of Chapter***

The THECB announced that the postsecondary attainment for Black students is at historic levels (THECB, 2018). Although this is impressive, there are still many Black students who have the goal of achieving a higher education degree but are detoured from this goal because of repetitive problems that have existed since access into higher education was granted for this student population. It is, then, imperative that the UTA identify and implement the resources needed for the persistence rate of Black students to discontinue their historic reputation as being one of the lowest groups of participating college students in Central Texas institutions of higher education.

This chapter introduced and described the research design and method to explore this issue. It also included a description of the study's participants, the data collection instruments and procedures, and the theoretical framework that will be used to investigate and analyze the study's data.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This chapter discusses key findings from the research study on how Black undergraduates at UTA with impending graduation dates describe their ability to persist from registration to graduation. Data gathered from an interview, a focus group, and follow-up questionnaires informed the analysis of this study's three research questions. The findings are presented in three sections. The first section provides themes regarding the pre-college experience the undergraduates encountered, with the second section focusing on the barriers exhibited during the transition to their impending graduation dates. Finally, the third section presents the supporting factors that assisted the senior-level students to completion.

### **Section 1**

#### **RQ1: How Do Black Senior-Level Undergraduates at UT Austin Describe Their Precollege Experience?**

The first research question focuses on the experiences of the upcoming Black senior graduates during their pre-college stages. More specifically, it addresses the influence of attending college, the type of school environments attended before enrolling at UTA, the academic preparation of the students, and their prior expectations of attending the institution. Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome model was used as a theoretical framework to describe these experiences as the familial, academic, and social input students encounter pre-college can present as barriers, especially for Black students.

#### **Great Expectations**

#### ***Parental Aspirations***

The majority of the students indicated that it was an expectation that they would be attending college from the earliest point of entry into their K-12 academic journey. It was practically an understood next step after completing high school. As Niobe stated:

Well, I always knew I was going to college. That's how I was raised in that way. It was drilled in me to the point that I didn't even think about not going to college. It's like it's just something you have to do, just like you have to finish high school.

The students often indicated that their family member encouraged them to go as some their parents and siblings had taken the route of attending college in the past. As Iri expressed:

My brother and sister went to college, and in the fifth and sixth grade I was going to pep rallies at the colleges in Houston. I was always pushed to do my best and excel in school, so I was exceeding amongst the other students. My family and my environment very much made me understand that being competitive in school sets you up for the pipeline to college. I was definitely going to college because it was the standard in my family and the standard I had to show to my younger family members.

There were some students whose family members did not attend college, but they were still very adamant about the students following the path to college. As Xenia commented:

A lot of my family members did not graduate high school. My father didn't make it past the ninth grade, and my great grandma barely graduated high school because she had a baby, but she pushed through it. Graduating high school in my family is an accomplishment, but there was a great expectation for me to go to college because I was smart and had the opportunity to go.

Family members possibly identify the advantages of the students earning a college degree and therefore are more encouraging to the students.

Some of the students expressed the encouragement of going to college from family as a means of conquering and/or expanding the privilege of attending the top-ranking school in Central Texas. As Iri further emphasized, "My dad was born in 1966



and was supposed to attend UTA, but for some reason wasn't able to attend, possibly because of finances. I am then like his legacy." As the youngest of five siblings, Brione's witnessed her oldest brother graduating from UTA and had family members motivating her to go even though she was skeptical about taking on the mission. She recalled:

It was decades ago when he graduated, so people still classify me as a first-generation student. Going to a PWI was something new. Everyone else was thinking I can do it, and I never really saw myself not finishing college. I just couldn't envision the graduation at that moment. I experienced people having high expectations for me in the community and my family. They were persistent in me going to college, especially my mom. It was stamped in me since childhood and being one of the few in the family to go was extra pressure.

The participants deciding to enroll in college, in particular one that prior family members previously attended, align with the Astin's IEO model as it indicates that experiences of their family members influences their pre-college input in terms of knowing about college and being encouraged to earn a college degree. These students exhibit the ingrained mentality that going to college is the expected next step after completing high school. Institutions must then secure the resources and supportive systems to help these students meet the expectations of not only their families, but most importantly, the students who are venturing into higher education.

### ***Degrees As Financial Capes***

All of the students agreed that earning a college degree was a necessity to attain a lifestyle that would be not only beneficial to them, but also to their families. These degrees, thus, serve as a financial cape as they seemingly will help rescue the students and their families from dire financial straits. These degrees will also help those students from middle-income household environments as well as they will be used to maintain the

lifestyles they are accustomed to living, perhaps even elevating the level of their living circumstances. As Zorah remarked:

My mom has a master's degree, and my dad never finished college. Though my parents were never domineering about going to college, I think that I just recognize that by being Black, high education was just going to be important for me in order to get where I want to be in life.

Loren also recognized the need to have a degree to be successful. She stated, "To my family, college is a kind of vehicle to a comfortable life. When you go to college, you have a better chance to get a good job and have job security." Patrick mentioned the need to get a certain type of degree also matters, "You want to have one of the big professions, like being an engineer, so that you are not a disappointment to family and make a lot of money." Earning a substantial salary and not being overworked to acquire it is also a part of why acquiring degrees contribute to a quality life. As Iri exclaimed:

My dad is a truck driver, and my mom was a dental assistant. They worked very hard and very long hours to make sure that the money they made was going to go to my education and me. They would tell me we work hard now so that you don't have to work as hard.

As the participants indicated, earning a college degree is considered the answer to financial responsibility. Earning a degree, especially from a top-ranked university, yields the possibility of attaining a career that provided financial stability for both the students and their families. This too, aligns with the Astin's IEO model in terms of the socioeconomic status of students and their families having an influence on their decisions to enroll in college and earn a degree. Thus, institutions must not only provide a means to earning a degree, but also a pathway to earning one that is cost-effective as to not drain the financial gains students have acquired because of the degrees.

### ***Diverse Outcasts***

The students of this study graduated from high schools that were either public or private, with some being charter or magnet schools. Although some were well-funded, there were also those that were underfunded within the group of high school types. Several students attended low-income, majority Black populated high schools and were concerned about adapting to a college environment that would essentially be the opposite of their prior academic experiences. Though those who attended diverse high schools seemed to have a more optimistic perspective of adapting to the environment. Elle revealed:

My high school was one of the most diverse districts in the state, and it was well-funded with a mixture of middle-class and upper-class students. It was Black people, Hispanic people, and Asian people. I would definitely say it was more White people, but it was not overwhelming. I didn't expect to have any issues attending college with a diverse group of people.

Niobe spoke about attending high school while living on a farm in San Antonio, as did most of her classmates. She stated, "People having horses, cows, and American flags on their cars was the culture." However, she, too, had a very diverse friend-set and did not foresee that changing in college even though that turned out to not be her experience.

Zorah attended a high school in the surrounding area of Austin, which had a diverse student body representative of the city limits. She disclosed:

There was a decent amount of Hispanic and Black people; I would say there was a lower percentage of Asian students. The majority was White, but I definitely didn't feel like it was a majority White space. I had friends from every race and did not feel as if I would not be able to have the same type of friend groups in college, but it did turn out that I had a majority of Black friends.

Though these students had a diverse group of friends in their pre-college experiences, they essentially shifted to friend groups dominated by fellow Black peers once enrolled at UTA. They sought these peers of the same race as a means of not feeling isolated as Astin's Theory of Involvement explains. Students in predominantly White institutions intentionally seek to find friend groups of the same race so that they feel some type of commonality in classroom and campus interactions. Institutions must then provide students of color, in this case Black students, with the needed access to resources and facilities to allow them to grow these peer relationships on campus through the funding of cultural activities and events in institutional-provided spaces.

### **Finding 1: Institutional Inability to Implement Transitional Systems for Academic Success**

#### ***Academic Deception***

The majority of the students in this study were given the privilege, based on their academic achievement, of being assigned to advanced placement and/or gifted and talented classes. Due to their success in these various course subject classes, they earned the distinction of being in the top-ten%age of their respective high school graduating classes throughout the state of Texas.

As a result, they were granted admission to UTA as part of one of the institution's recruiting policies in an effort to admit a more diverse body of students, with an emphasis on race and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, they found that these various specialized classes were not parallel to the expected academic level or knowledge of a college student.

Xenia graduated from an inner-city, under-funded high, majority Black magnet high school in Houston. She divulged that the school was on the cusp of being closed because of continuously not being able to meet the required six-week benchmarks in the district. As a result, many students did not meet the requirements to attend college and were set on the track of learning trade skills. Xenia, herself, admitted to skipping, and sometimes sleeping, classes during the school year. However, being in some AP classes and earning satisfying grades earned her a spot in the top-ten% of her class. She stated:

Being in the top-ten% caused teachers and counselors to pay attention to you, and if you are in the top percentage, they will break their necks to make sure that you go to college. They mostly pushed people to go to Texas Southern or Prairie View, but my family told me that I would get in at UT so I might as well apply.

Patrick experienced the same perception at his high school. He communicated that the principal and other administrators only talked to the students who were either “in trouble or winning an award.” He stated, “The counselors and teachers leaned in more into the students who were in those AP classes versus the other classes.” However, those AP classes provided a false sense of protection as Elle made known:

I had been in gifted and talented classes, including AP classes. My parents always challenged me to take those sorts of rigorous classes, but I think my high school definitely sheltered me in some ways.

Wrae asserted that her dual credit classes taken external to her high school setting prepared her for college, but her AP classes, like the other students, did not adequately prepare her for UT. She attended a high school that was a career academy geared towards preparing students for careers post high school in areas such as engineering, entrepreneurship, and even vehicle maintenance. However, Wrae noticed that the

advanced placement classes were geared towards students mastering and successfully passing the AP course material and exams. She exclaimed:

In classes like calculus it was more about preparing you how to structure your mind to think about how ‘do I enter this information to do my best on this very specific testing platform,’ instead of learning how to apply calculus to statistics and computer science, which is what I needed at UT.

Not being academically prepared before entering college does indeed have a major effect on the students’ ability to persist. Having negative experiences, as detailed in Astin’s Theory of Involvement, causes students to not feel connected to the curriculum and withdraw from their institutions. One would assume, then, that these students would not have negative classroom experiences. However, being enrolled in advanced placement classes and having high academic ranking did not signify that these students were academically prepared either for the college courses at UTA, which magnified their feeling of disconnection to their chosen place of college. As a result, UTA must provide a system that alleviates the academic issues encountered by these students by providing resources that close the academic gap between their college-preparatory classes and their college courses. Allowing these students the opportunity to be admitted based in part because of their academic achievements, essentially indicates that they are college ready and can be successful in their college courses. However, since being identified as a high achiever is not indicative of this concept, the institution has to implement some transitional methods to help these students transition into high achieving college students.

### **Summary of Section 1**

Participants in the study shared their pre-college experiences. The students shared their experiences with their families and communities and their influences on their

decision to enroll in college. Most of the students ultimately already had a firm understanding that they would be attending college, even those students who were apprehensive about their ability to be successful. Students also shared their ability to adapt at a predominantly White institution using their previous experiences in diverse high school settings. Finally, students discussed the false perception of being academically prepared for college courses. In summary, findings from section one supported the concept that pre-college experiences can indeed present themselves as supportive factors and barriers. In answering RQ #1, participants identified that college is often a predetermined pathway by family that is meant to not only yield financial stability, but also serves as the precursor for proceeding generations to attend college. Although this may be a positive affirmation, the findings in section one ultimately did reinforce the notion that high-school academic curriculums and adapting to their social systems do not necessarily transfer to college academic and social environments. The next section continues with the discussion of barriers encountered and their effects on students as they persisted to completion.

## Section 2

### **RQ2: How Do Black Students Make Meaning of the Barriers They Encountered During Their College Experience?**

This section addresses the second research question and describes the students experiences with barriers that presented themselves as they persisted through college.

This section will explore the barriers in terms of several factors that cause the students to not integrate into the campus culture, along with the issues they encounter

when using academic, financial assistance, mentorship, and mental health resources. The findings for the section were framed using Astin's Theory of Involvement and the Input-Environment-Outcome model. Tinto's Theory of Student Departure was also used to analyze the student responses.

### **Institutional Barricades**

#### ***Tertiary Skill Deficiencies***

Negative classroom experiences lead students to either not be academically effective and/or withdraw from college. When students, especially Black students, are unable to interact and be active members in the learning process and/or be academically underprepared, it leads to negative results. Lack of support or negative interactions using supportive resources also create barriers. Students discussed how negative classroom and learning lab experiences became deterrents to attending classes and going to the labs. Also, not understanding how to properly use the provided learning resources caused further issues for some of the students.

#### ***Progressive Regression***

In the focus group, discussion surrounding the need for UTA to create more systems to support students who graduated from low-performing high schools, were admitted to the college, but were struggling to maintain the needed academic output to persist. One student vented:

They give us the money to come here, and that's great, but we're unable to compete because we're not smart enough. We're coming from these schools that didn't prepare us, and we then have to take remedial classes.



Another student in the focus group insulated that race plays a role in the placement of students in developmental education. He stated:

It's like being a product of your environment. It's not because you're Black, but you don't see a lot of White people in low-income areas, so it's not explicitly race, but race very heavily is a factor. Race is a factor in overcrowded high schools with 40 to 50 students trying to learn.

Students in the focus group continued to mention issues such as being ranked in the top-ten%ile of their high school class, but not having the expected background of a top-ranking student. One student disclosed, "I literally almost did not graduate the last week of class because I didn't turn in an assignment. I turned it in and still graduated in the top percent. So, I jumped from d..n near nothing to graduate and still being top of my class, to coming here and having to learn different habits." This caused another member of the group to admit, "I was a senior in high school and reading at a ninth grade level, according to the district's benchmark reports. However, I still was in the top ten% too at my school." During her interview, Brione stated that while she passed the reading and writing sections of the placement test, it was the gateway course of math that caused her to have to take a developmental education course. She conveyed:

At my high school, the curriculum was heavily math and science based, and I'm not good in math or science, but I did the best I could to pass. I wouldn't say I succeeded in those areas though. It was challenging for me to understand at times.

She then went on to describe the developmental math class atmosphere at UTA. She stated:

Most of the students in that class were Black. To be honest, the first few days that we did meet, like the first week or two, it was kind of awkward because we were in a developmental class in college. I thought this is what we're going to do, and I am going to rock with it. Eventually, everybody became closer; it was a majority

of Black people. The minority was the majority. A few people, like five others, were not Black. It was the Black students and the athletes.

Brione further added that being in that class caused her to realize just how much her high school's curriculum really did not prepare her for collegiate classroom material. In fact, she stated that she learned more in that class than any other previous classes in mathematics. A participant of the study, who was an Early College Start student, was able to add on to the mindset of students in developmental education classes during her interview as it was once one of her campus jobs. Loren revealed:

I tutored for developmental courses, and a lot of the the minority students who came in for help. Some of them were student athletes, and I don't think they really had much interest in learning the subject matter either, which is understandable. It was frustrating for them. However, they were committed; they definitely came in multiple times to get help with the subject matter.

Students also discussed the added burden of taking developmental courses as it pertains to the procedures of the university. Because the registration process, in terms of which students register first, is based on credit hours, those in the developmental courses had to wait to register. As a result, by the time the registration system was open to them, many times their needed courses would be closed because of full enrollment, or they would be waitlisted, which often led to them not being chosen to take the courses. This was especially frustrating as they noticed students who had entered college already with many hours because of dual credit courses, which were not offered at their high schools, create their schedules in a manageable way. Not being able to register in a reasonable time caused them to either take courses beyond their academic ability or wait until their senior year to take some of their freshman level core courses. Brione remarked:

For my major, I needed a math credit. I thought after finishing my developmental course, I would go on to the basic math class. I ended up taking a statistics course because it was one of the only ones open. I did not want to wait. I wanted to get math out of the way, so I took the class and it was the worst experience.

Xenia further explained the matter:

In my sophomore year, the freshmen students I was mentoring were registering before me. I am now in my senior year taking two science classes and an English class that I should have completed my freshman year.

Due to the registration system, some advisors suggested that students take up to 21 hours or more and/or attend summer school to graduate in four years. This presented a problem for these students as some explained that it was already a difficult feat to gather enough money for tuition, housing, and other essentials, so it was nearly impossible to enroll for the summer semesters or even lengthened their completion to six years. As a result, some of them witnessed fellow developmental students withdrawing from the university. Brione revealed:

Some people were really trying to make it through college. However, they can do. To be honest, I know it is probably more than a few people who were like ‘I barely got through developmental, and now I’m not passing the these classes (the ones they had to take due to needed courses being full), I’m just going to withdraw because this is not working. I haven’t felt a sense of achievement yet.’

Developmental education students are more likely to have a difficult time adapting to the classroom environment, in terms of both the curriculum and being comfortable in the classroom setting. This is due in part because they are academically underprepared because of inadequate high school systems, causing them to not only learn the new course material but also trying to fill in the gaps of the material that they either did not learn or were not introduced to during their pre-college experiences. These magnified inadequacies are made worse because of the lack of supportive systems needed in the

higher educational institution. With UTA not providing any academic transitional support, these students further fall behind in their academic work, causing their academic confidence. This can be an especially difficult period for students who are transitioning from environments where they were identified as the high achieving students to now being in courses meant to develop their educational skills to get them on par with the other students. Not feeling academically equipped causes barriers to persistence and sometimes can lead to withdrawing from college, aligning with Tinto's Theory of Departure.

Even if the students do not withdraw, they are still somewhat remaining stagnant in their academic journey. With the institution default of not having an efficient registration process for the developmental education students, they either end up prolonging their undergraduate years or take high risks by enrolling in courses beyond their knowledge base. The institution, then, is placing them in a predicament to possibly fail their courses, which inevitably affects their grade point averages. Astin's IEO model explains that these type of negative academic experiences lead to students possibly being placed on academic probation as some of these study participants struggled with during their studies; consequently, they also faced the greater threat of having their scholarships being revoked.

### ***Academic Setbacks***

Adjusting to the college environment also proved to be a barrier for the academic success of students. With classes, places of employment, and being involved in campus life, among other things, sometimes created academic issues. Xenia said:

I'm making a deadline, doing everything in routine with work and school and organizations. I was doing homework at night and in the morning. A lot of times I didn't even realize that I was failing more than one class, and when I sort of knew in the back of my mind, I thought there was nothing I could do about it.

Wrae commented on the topic in terms of being fearful of withdrawing from a course when feeling overwhelmed:

I was taking like 18 hours one semester my freshman or sophomore year, and it was killing me. I wanted to use my Q-drop, but I had this weird feeling of failure against myself. I wish I didn't focus on that. Looking back I should have dropped a class and protected my peace. However, I this sense that I would be a failure for quitting.

Niobe shared about falling behind in her classes as she was dealing with being away from home for the first time in a large city, missing family, but also partaking in her newly-found independence as a young adult. It caused her grades to decrease, and she commented:

I was dealing with scholastic probation, and my counselor told me I could avoid it by withdrawing for the semester. She said that I could withdraw from my classes, come back the next semester, and the semester would not affect my academic record. I declined the offer in fear that I would not be able to get back into UT. I told her that I would take the bad credits, not withdraw, and deal with the situation I had placed myself in that semester.

Patrick shared in his interview that he, too, had encountered academic turmoil. After having a difficult year by having to repeat some of his courses and trying to remain focused on his athletic responsibilities, his grade point average weakened. He divulged:

I took on a lot of responsibility, and I wasn't ready to be a full-time D-1 athlete and get good grades. My grades took a heavy hit, so I got cut from the team. Then, I didn't have football, and I barely had school. I had to regroup and buckle down a bit. The next semester my grades were increasing, but then they took another hit after I did poorly on my exams. Then I was able to come back from that semester and work on improving my grades.

Being academically underprepared and not having sufficient study skills will inevitably lead to students having to experience academic setbacks that may cause them to deal unexpected consequences. These study participants, who were former top-ranking high school students and involved in college student organizations and athletic programs, by research standards, should not have been confronted with making pivotal decisions in terms of possibly withdrawing from college or striving to regain control of their academic lives.

## **Finding 2: Lack of Institution's Ability to Reduce Academic Deficits.**

### ***Hindrances Within the Help***

The issue of not knowing how to successfully study for college material after being able to effortlessly work through their high school curriculum also was discussed by the participants. Xenia indicated that she didn't expect to struggle so much. She stated, "I guess I thought I would learn the environment, but I still barely know how to study. I am staying afloat, not drowning like I used to in previous years."

Zorah stated:

I didn't really necessarily feel ill-prepared. I more so felt prepared with the basic study skills, and my freshman year was fairly decent. When I got into my upper division courses, I was really like 'you don't know how to study.' It was tough trying to balance other classes and campus involvement, and at some point, it just felt like I was lost in the material. That was a scary place because I wanted to get my bearings in class. It was hard, but I just kept trying.

This proved to be true for Quentin as well. He made known in his interview:

I had a decent understanding that it was going to be harder when I got into college. Then, going into some classes, it was a lot more than anticipated. I came to college with a pretty good educational background. Sometimes, I didn't have to study as much, but in some classes, everything was moving so fast, and that's

difficult when three classes are moving fast. You had to actually block out time to study and pay attention in class.

Developed study skills are a necessity to being a successful student, especially at a top-ranked university. These student participants not having a blueprint to help them remain organized and focus on their studies is an issue that could have lead to them departing the college. Tinto's Theory of Departure makes note of the fact that students lacking both the skills and the study habits to learn the material are those that typically do not complete their academic studies.

Though the university has quite a number of learning resources like learning labs, writing centers, and computer labs, they, too, posed an issue at times for the Black student participants. In the focus group, some of them admitted that they did not know there were facilities available to them with supportive people and learning resources. One student in the group stated that as a first-generation student, she was unaware of these labs as she acknowledged the fact that no one in her family could tell him/her about them in advance. She said it would have been helpful if the professors gave information about it at the beginning of the semester instead of making them aware of them once grades were falling. Although some students in the focus group knew about the learning centers, they still did not fully understand the concept in terms of to what extent the tutors could help them with their assignments and that students needed a full-paper to have tutors help them with the editing of it.

Those that did to the learning centers, however, did not always seem comfortable with the tutors. Patrick explained:

I tried to go during my difficult semester, but I didn't really connect with tutors. I didn't feel like I had a bond with them, and I have to have some type of relationship with them instead of them just throwing out facts at me. I felt that tutoring wouldn't work for me if I only felt like a number and not a person needing help.

Xenia had similar experiences when attempting to get tutored. She said that she was learning new concepts in class, and she really wanted to understand and practice them. However, she felt like the tutors assumed she was a college student that she should already know the concepts from her previous schooling. She mentioned:

The tutors felt like I only needed a little help since I should automatically know most of the information beforehand. They made it seem like a refresher ordeal and would ask did I not remember learning this in a previous class. That really hindered me going to get help from them.

Quentin had a differing reason as to not go for tutoring. He stated:

I personally never did any of the tutorial services, but there were time I would attend lead sessions. I think my reasoning for not going to one-on-one tutoring sessions was because my friends that went to them would come back a lot of the times and say they were teaching the tutors. As for me, I really didn't want to waste some credit on tutoring.

Some students in the focus group recounted times going to the Writing Center and having the tutors seemingly question their writing skills. They mentioned that the center's tutors do not necessarily teach and help them with their writing and grammar; they more so just edit the papers and send them on their way.

Some student participants discussed the computer labs in their interviews and suggested that while they were a great help for software program accessibility, but some of the textbook required access codes were expensive, amounting sometimes to \$200 dollars for use. Loren commented that it would have been helpful to have free printing in the labs because a lot of students are on budgets and aren't able to afford it.



In fact, in the focus group, one student disclosed that he/she had four friends who dropped out of UT who were good students and had their tuition paid, but their grades suffered because they didn't know how to use the learning resources or could not afford to use them.

All of the student participants had proven themselves to be intelligent and independent learners in their pre-college academic settings; fortunately, these traits transferred with them to UTA. However, they still encountered major difficulties adjusting to studying materials and understanding and using learning resources on campus. The majority of the students in the focus group came to the conclusion that the university needed a centralized place for resources so that Black students could more easily adapt to the campus and get the needed information to be successful. The institution not having a place for students, in particular Black students who often represent the majority population from underserved academic communities in predominantly White institutions, poses a constraint on their ability to achieve.

When students understand the policies and are able to have the support of the learning resources, as indicated in Astin's IEO model and Tinto's Theory of Departure respectfully, they are able to adapt to their academic environment and be successful. However, if UTA does not provide Black students with information regarding learning resources and their policies, this cannot occur. As indicated through these participants, not knowing how to use the resources or even having knowledge of them caused them unnecessary academic stress, which could have been easily avoided through the attentiveness of equitable access to educational resources by the institution.

### **Finding 3: Institutional Inability to Foster Inclusive Practices in Classroom**

#### **Environments**

##### ***Diversity being Eradicated by Microaggressive Behaviors***

When students cannot adapt to their classroom environments, they often do not achieve their academic goals because of feelings of inadequacy and isolation. This is presented in the forms of not participating in class, not being interactive with fellow students, and having disconnections with those in authority.

##### ***Integrated Isolation***

Being a college student in a new environment with a multitude of new people can be an overwhelming experience in itself; however, confronting those fears, along with being the only one of one's race in the classroom setting, further elevates those feelings of anxiety. Essentially, the integration of these classroom environments by Black students is causing them to be and feel isolated among the other students. Based on the student participants' feedback, this is a common occurrence as they try to maneuver through the environment and adapt to being just a student.

In the focus group, many of the students considered entering into the classroom as entering into a completely different culture where the interactions, language and behaviors differed from their previous academic experiences. They confessed that because of the fact of sometimes being the only Black student or one of a few minority students caused them to minimize their participation in class. Elle, coming from a diverse high school environment where she excelled in her academic life, remarked:

I think I definitely became more shy at UT because it's a school where everyone is smart and pretty much on the same level. Everyone is awesome, and it can be a

bit intimidating. I don't know what it was about UT, but when I would go into classes and be the only Black person, I would just automatically put my wall up and feel distrustful of everyone in class. I would think people were looking at me, so I would not talk and hoped no one would try to talk to me.

She further explained how it affected her ability to learn. She stated:

I felt isolated. Being maybe one of two or three Black people in my class made it very isolating. I felt uncomfortable about asking questions and speaking out. The uncomfortable feeling caused me to disengage with a lot of the material that I was being taught because I couldn't really focus.

Patrick asserted that he didn't look forward to going to class until he reached his junior year and was in his classes for his major. He also stated that he started participating more when classes became fully virtual, because of feeling more comfortable in his own safe zone.

In the past, however, he stated, "I wouldn't talk in my larger classes, but sometimes I would in the smaller ones. I wouldn't say a lot then, but I've progressed and I've gotten more comfortable as I have gotten to the end of my undergraduate years." Wrae shared these same sentiments. She expressed:

Being in a large 400 person class, there were some White students that I don't think had any prior experience being around any people of color. They didn't know how to navigate their behavior. There would be times when my friend and I would walk down or come through the front of class, and they would just stare at us for an extended period of time.

She also spoke about not participating in class until her later years at UT. She added:

Just like a lot of students of color, I used to be hesitant to raise my hand in case I gave the wrong answer even if I knew I had the right answer. The worst feeling is wanting to raise your hand so bad and knowing the the answer. You come really close to raising your hand, and then someone else gives the right answer and you could have easily answered it. I definitely think I shouldn't have been so hesitant.

Being the only Black student, or even only one of a few minority students, in the classroom environment affects students' ability to interact with others and become a part of the classroom unit. As Astin's Theory of Involvement explains, being able to adapt to the classroom environment is instrumental for the success of the students. As a result, these student participants having to experience the typical adjustment to college as all undergraduate students, they also had to deal with the additional pressure of being a Black student.

### ***Microinsults and Microassaults by Peers and Faculty***

Being the only Black student in class often puts them in the position of becoming symbols of tokenism. In the focus group, some students vented about being seemingly questioned about their intelligence level and basically their worthiness of being at the university, due in part to the increasing notion that Black students were admitted because of their race as the university aims to have a more diverse student population. Zorah recalled in her interview an experience of trying to help other students. She stated:

There were some classes where people were helpful, and there were other times when people definitely question my intelligence. I remember my freshman year in my chemistry class, a subject that came easy for me. We were in discussions going through material, and I would be trying to show the other students how to work through it and get the answer because they were confused. They would ask me if I was sure, just second guessing me, and then call over the teaching assistant, who would say and do the exact same thing. There were maybe three more discussion groups where this happened again. At that point, I decided that I was going to do my work, they could call the TA, and I was going to be great all on my own.

Students questioning the intelligence level of Black students further makes them feel like outcasts in classroom settings.

Student participants recalled having to deal with joining and being a part of group projects, which sometimes caused them to feel even more isolated in the classroom environment. Elle communicated about one of her experiences:

I knew the class material, but sometimes I would be really quiet and sometimes feel ignored. When we would have group projects in class, I normally didn't have friends in my classes. Everybody else would be talking to one another, so when it came to group projects, I would look around and think, 'Oh no, who do I pair out with?' It was tough being the only or one of few Black people in class.

Xenia recalled being in a class group project where another student asked the teacher to be put in her group. The young man proceeded to ask her questions, such as, "Was your high school really like in the movies about Compton?" and "Did you have gangs in your school?" She noticed that he didn't have cultural awareness, but his questioning led to the other members of the group being just as interested in the answers. In this case, it made her uncomfortable, but there are times when the group members feel uncomfortable with having a Black student on the team. Loren dealt with a situation like this and shared:

I was fired from a group of four people, one being an international student. She felt as if I criticized her too much, including making her feel bad after correcting her grammatical errors in her part of the report. The group wrote a three-page essay explaining why they could not work with me because of my bad attitude. My professor encouraged me to apologize, but I didn't want to compromise. I did the rest of the project by myself. Looking back, I maybe could have worded things so that they didn't seem so criticizing as there may have a cultural difference, but it's kind of sad because I really liked the professor, who is a White woman, because I had taken two of her classes and we connected on a level through discussion with each other.

Groups can already be difficult to maneuver; adding race to the mixture further qualifies the Black students feeling of isolation.

Student participants also discussed in their personal interviews and in the focus groups about how sometimes it's not the other students that make them feel isolated; in

fact, some professors have caused the learning environment to be a tension filled atmosphere. Patrick mentioned that some professors “only care as much as the students care.” Although he did say that there are some professors who will reach out to students if they are slacking, but it’s rarity. He stated, “I did go to some office hours with one of my professors, but it felt like a disconnect.”

Xenia also commented about a professor who didn’t seem to take her seriously. She had to move off campus to Riverside, and that required her catching the bus.

No matter how early she would get to the bus station, by the time it got to her stop, it would be full. That caused her to wait for the next bus, which add on traffic congestion, made her late for class. Her professor had no sympathy for her, would get angry, and deduct her participation points as a consequence.

Zorah also remarked about a professor putting her in an uncomfortable position. She recalled:

The professor accused me of cheating on part two of a take-home exam. Unbeknownst to me until later, my friend and another student in a different section, both Black women, were being reviewed for cheating, so we couldn’t get our grades back. We had to go through an entire process with the Dean of Students as he accused us of working together since our answers were similar, which was due to his specific rules when submitting our work. The case ended up being dismissed. I’m not sure sure if it was race-related, but it was disheartening.

Although this situation may not have been race-related, there were other students who had issues with professors that were indeed based on race. Xenia recalled a religion professor backing up a student who argued that Black and brown students do really bad on standardized testing because they are not as smart as White people.

In Brione's interview, she talked about this weird phenomenon she felt of going from an environment where everyone, including the administrators, were Black. Her attempt to adapt to the new classroom environment was made more difficult when during a class lecture about African Americans and sexuality, the professor caused both the other two Black students and her to feel cornered with a spotlight on them. Wrae also communicated that she too had been in a uncomfortable predicament in class. She said:

Before I took a computer science class with this professor, an upperclassman friend told me that this professor had said some questionable things and was known for his microaggressions. He had asked why don't you people get into programming. I took the the class because I really wanted to learn the computer science subject, but I dropped it because he didn't motivate me to stay there.

Though some people do not think these type of occurrences occur on campus, Wrae said, "Just because we don't put up a big billboard and start petitions, things do happen." In the focus group, some students suggested that professors become "more culturally competent and be able to have conversations about intersectionality or race or whatever makes it more comfortable for Black students to actually have a conversation in class." The students in the group wanted the faculty to be able to discuss curriculum topics entangled with race, and not just be race-focused. They discussed feeling like they have to talk about the topic in context because they are the only Black people. The focus group participants agreed that if professors learned how to "teach in a manner that everyone understands what is going on, then it would open the door for people to say what they want without feeling as if things may become disruptive." One of the students in the group reiterated that concept by adding that he wanted professors to "make Black

students feel comfortable and just allow them to be students and not just quote, unquote Black men.”

Black students being outcasts because of being alienated by peers, challenged by professors and having their intelligence level questioned are all barriers that present negative environments. Encountering just one of these obstacles could cause a student to reject both the classroom and campus environment. These students experienced unnecessary stress that further complicated their ability to learn and participate in the classroom, thus limiting their educational intake and ability to adapt to the institution that they chose to attend as a means of growing socially and academically. The institution not fostering an environment of inclusion, either through diversity training of faculty and students or promoting cultural understanding, creates an isolating environment for the population of students it is targeting to retain at the university. The retention of Black students is a continuous process that encompasses the intentional acts of inclusion by creating environments that promote diversity not just through words, but more importantly, addressed through the actions of faculty and peers guided by the institution’s leadership.

### ***Exclusively Inclusive***

Campus events serve as bridges to assist students in learning more about their institution and those who are in attendance with them on the campus. When negative actions occur, especially under the guise of them being college traditions, it can be even more impactful. Spaces that are seemingly inclusive are indeed just the opposite; they are essentially exclusive, in particular to Black students.



### ***Excluded in Reserved Spaces***

In the focus group, one of the major discussions centered around how Black students' socioeconomic backgrounds affected their level of access and what they experienced before coming to UTA, but now, they are all in a common place based on race. Iri exclaimed that "UT is like a mini-America that we're all in with our different experiences, but we share the common place of being the five%. We're just trying to achieve our goals."

Some spaces, however, the students feel are not welcoming to them. Niobe commented about trying to join a theatre group after being in the theatrical arena for most of her life, but was shut out when trying to join the 'White spaces' that seemed not interested in her being a part of them. Wrae commented about another organization that is known to portray racist actions by hosting politically incorrect and offensive parties and being brazenly racist to those Black students they encounter at their fraternity house. In fact, most Black residents in the student housing, separated only by a sidewalk, across from them have an understanding that they do not walk on the sidewalk on that side of the street to avoid issues. Some students communicated that the administration knows of this fraternity's discriminating actions, but if anything, would only suspend them if hazing was involved.

Not in irony, this organization is one of the main co-hosts for an event that came up in every student's interview in terms of being the campus event that is most divisive among the student body. The students describe it in varying ways, with Quentin describing it as "a week of events in late spring where White fraternities and sororities

throw festivals and have celebrity rappers come out.” However, he quickly realized the disparity between the races when the Black students were charged more to get inside the fraternity house. Elle added:

Historically, these fraternities have been known to literally shut out Black people. The Black people go to the parties, and they will tell you that you can’t come in unless you’re an athlete. It’s just so interesting because these fraternities have Black hip-hop artists come to Austin to entertain.

Iri’s description of the event paralleled Elle’s perspective, but she further disclosed:

I was never interested in attending that event because historically, it was something that Black students did not attend. If they did, they didn’t go in masses, just one or two friends or with athletes. It was an understood thing. As upperclassmen, we would let the other students know to be careful and know that they might not even let you in the event.

Brione was still unsure of the event’s purpose and stated:

I never truly understood what they were celebrating. They would wear nice cowboy and cowgirl boot and get drunk in front of their Greek-life houses. They would party in the streets, and it was like Mardi Gras, but for White students.

Xenia and her friends attended one of the forbidden events out of both naivety and curiosity. She opened up:

We, two girls and a boy, went party hopping to experience the campus. To get in the parties was free for the girls, but the guys had to pay \$10 to \$20 dollars. At the mansion we went to there was not another single Black person. While this should have been alarming to us, we continued to drink and then full beer cans began to be thrown at us. We were really shocked, but then a girl told us that’s just what the guys do and then invited us to dance with her and her friends. They kept complimenting our dancing and asking us to show them certain dance steps. The crowd was surrounding us on the dance floor. It wasn’t until later that I learned the history of the event that I realized what they were doing. Yes, so that’s tradition.

Inclusive environments are needed in order for all students to feel a part of the campus community. One of the most important indicators of persisting from year to year to

completion is the feeling that one has adapted into not only the classroom environment, but the entire campus community. When these participants felt excluded year after year from one of the major social activities that is a campus tradition to the majority of the student body, it creates a barrier to them successfully integrating into not only the campus community, but the campus culture as well. With the majority of these student participants coming from diverse pre-college academic backgrounds where they created peer relationships and participated in social activities without feeling not welcomed, it is then a difficult position to come to realization that these type of reserved spaces exist on a supposedly inclusive campus. The institution not actively observing and noting the segregation of campus activities meant for all its students increases the concern of the Black students as it causes them to feel they are being overlooked.

### ***Isolation Disguised as Tradition***

Another tradition that is of recent concern for Black undergraduates is the school spirit song, “The Eyes of Texas,” as the lyrics supposedly make reference to to the practice of slavery. As to expected, many Black undergraduates are displeased about the matter, which has spearheaded the call for the university to address the manner.

Quentin conveyed his observation regarding the effect of the song on the Black student body. He said:

When Black students started to become more aware of the history of the song, I noticed there was less participation of the students going to the game. Then the issue started generating on news channels, and it caused people to learn about it even more. There’s been a lot of dismay with how things have been handled.

Patrick initially was uncertain about the uproar of the song until he listened to it. He commented:

I was in the huddle with the rest of my teammates, and I began to think this is a weird song. It was amazing how many people were singing the song in the stands who had never set foot on the campus. They were just following tradition, I guess. I don't feel like my peers and I bleed burnt orange; I went to games when I was on the team. I know there was an outcry about the Black students wanting to change the song. It's not even a song that saved lives; it's deeply rooted in racism. But it's not going to be changed.

In the focus group, the song was mentioned as it was one of the top news stories of that day. Most of the students thought the outcome depended on the financial aspect of the issue as the university seemingly wanted to keep its alumni engaged as they were the ones donating funds to the college. Several mentioned that this would be to the detriment of the Black students, who felt their concerns were not being taken seriously even though they were active members of the committees designed to address this matter.

Allowing this song to be used during ceremonious moments on campus impacts the ability of Black undergraduates to adapt to both their campus culture and the community as they feel the college has not taken the proper steps to maintain fair and equitable treatment of all students, especially the Black ones. The college choosing to keep a song related to the confederacy and former minstrel shows is not one that should represent a university that is also composed of Black students, no matter how low the percentage of students.

Those students in the focus group also discussed the need for UTA to purposely recruit more Black students to create a more diverse culture on campus. It should be a more targeted goal, and many thought Black students should be recruited separately as their needs are a lot of the times different from the other races. Many of the students felt

that UTA was simply relying on the top-ten% policy to bring in Black students instead of intentionally going to find a diverse group of Black students.

Having more Black students will not only allow other fellow Black students the ability to form a stronger network of peers, but also creates the diversity needed on campus to help the culture of the campus grow as well, according to members of the focus group.

To effectively adapt into the campus community, students must have a sense of belief that the values of the university are those that encompass them as well. These student participants had difficulty feeling as though they, too, were a valued community of students. Encountering isolation on a continuous basis leads to students wanting to withdraw from the institution. However, it is the institution's responsibility to set in place systems that eradicate any behavior and actions by the campus community that would cause any of its student body members to want to withdraw because of feeling undervalued. Not having these systems already established causes the institution to be reactive rather than proactive about race-related issues, which further magnifies the issues among the Black student population, causing them to feel excluded in an proposed inclusive environment.

### ***Financial Side Effects***

Financing a college education remains one of the most difficult stages encountered from the moment a student decides to attend college, selects the chosen university, and remains in the selected institution until completion. Whether students earn scholarships, take out student loans, acquire employment, and/or receive financial

support from their family, it still remains one of the greatest stressors for college students, especially those of the Black race.

“Some people walk around on campus without the extra baggage of stress, and it’s a privilege that a lot of minorities don’t have,” asserted Patrick. Although this statement arguably could be about a multitude of issues, it centers on finances. The study’s participants found themselves faced with financial problems no matter what form of assistance they were using. A lot of the time, Black students do not know how they are going to fund college. As Wrae proclaimed:

Leading up to college, I really did not know where the money was going to come from for college. My parents did not save anything, which like for many immigrant parents is pretty rare that you have even the leverage to save anything for your child’s education.

Even after students figure out the means in which they’ll be paying for college, the stress does not end. Even with a scholarship helping to fund Quentin’s education, he still also used financial aid. Unfortunately, financial aid sometimes poses an issue too. He stated:

My FAFSA was delayed due to my parents’ filing status. My sophomore year was rough because I wasn’t able to get any funding. In my head, I was thinking I’m on a payment plan, and I am going to be out of school if I don’t have my payment. I just kept a positive mindset, and my parents were able to pull me through.

Even with Patrick’s scholarship, he still felt pressure. He stated:

I have a scholarship that a lot of other students at Yale and UCLA have, and you always hear what their grade averages are and the projects they’re working on. I felt the need to step up so that I could bring something to the table.

Patrick also felt stress making sure he met the standards for his scholarship. He said:

There was a scary semester where my grades were low, and I was put on academic probation for a semester. There were at times all zeroes in my account, and when I’m at a critical point, I can’t be happy. I couldn’t even focus on my class.

Unexpected financial difficulties can also affect a student's housing set-up for the semester. Zorah recalled her situation:

My brother and I dropped classes, and as a result, we dropped below the certain amount of hours that made us eligible for the Texas Grant we'd received the year before. This decreased our financial aid, thus affecting us possibly getting our apartment. However, my mom has good bearings on how things work from her years in college and was able get us help with the funding. It turned out there was leftover money from the grant that we were able to secure.

Thankfully, Zorah had an institutional agent, her mom, help her maneuver through the process, but Wrae had to figure out a Plan B as her finances were not guaranteed. She noted:

I ended up moving off campus my sophomore year because it was cheaper than living in the dorms. I began applying for all of these internships because I had no guarantee I was going to have on and I needed one to pay for my junior year. I was spiraling and really nervous, and I wasn't sure I was going to be a residential assistance because it was competitive. I was waitlisted for the RA position, and I didn't know how I was going to pay for housing. I thought I would have to take a gap semester and work to save money to return. But, by the grace of God, I got my internship, and then I got a call to be an RA that summer.

Not knowing if you are going to have housing is one roadblock, but not having food can prove to be a great hardship as well. Xenia recalled the time she experienced a major bout with being food insecure. She stated:

There was a difficult time when I didn't have any food. I was living on campus, and I was using the food card that UT gives us to purchase food in the dining halls. I think there was about \$1800 dollars on it. I thought it was for the semester, but it was for the entire year. When I got to the second semester of my freshman year, I didn't have any money because they didn't refill the card. It wasn't difficult to deplete the card if you are eating three meals a day though. I called home, and my mom could only send \$20 and told me to buy noodles and hot dogs. Unfortunately, some of my other friends ran out of money, so we would struggle together. A lot of nights I went to bed hungry. I even missed one of my final exams because my mom nor dad didn't have any money to send me, I couldn't study due to hunger, and I just fell asleep. It was one of the stressful days of my life.

Unfortunately, this scenario is not as uncommon for Black students pursuing a higher education. Without the supplemental support from parents that students typically need because of unplanned or unexpected circumstances, they often are left in uncomfortable predicaments. In the focus group, some students were offended that UTA moved forward with increasing their tuition during the pandemic. They were angered that tuition fees supposedly pay for the amenities and learning labs that they weren't allowed to access. In addition, they felt as if they were paying for just a computer screen as they could only contact their professors while on Zoom as most of them no longer held designated office hours to help students, just encouraged them to email them on Canvas.

Although they weren't offered a refund for tuition fees, some did receive prorated refunds if they left the dormitories. Housing continued to distribute package meals during limited hours for those who had meal plans.

One area of anxiety was being let go from on-campus jobs while still having rent to pay along with purchasing food. Students, before and during the pandemic, have often found employment to help finance necessities and nonnecessities. After dealing with a traumatic experience with not having access to food, Xenia decided to meet the challenge. She expressed, "After my freshman year debacle, I decided to find employment at a fast food restaurant in case I ran out of funding for food again. Our boss allowed us to eat at work, so I would eat meals there when possible."

Niobe's parents decided to financially wean her by gradually not paying for anything, including taking her vehicle. To fund her shopping and attending Austin events, she decided to start her own businesses being a virtual assistant, a website builder for



social media, and a photographer. She, like Xenia, turned a negative experience into a positive one. Having more than one job is not unusual, unfortunately, especially if one is an on-campus job that grants students the opportunity to do their homework while working or working in a position parallel to their majors.

Loren, for example, admitted that she's had possibly five or six jobs at once. Throughout her time at UT she has worked at the Writing Center, been employed at the Admissions office and the African Studies department. Off campus she has worked as a legal aid and at a law firm. Iri also found herself working two jobs, not out of need, but because they were on-campus jobs that she was already working with previously for no pay. Being a campus tour guide and working in Admissions with the emphasis of recruiting Black and Hispanic students. However, she does empathize with minorities who do have to have jobs as a means of survival. Iri remarked:

My peers work because they have to pay rent, so they work a certain amount of hours to afford a place to live off-campus because it's cheaper. The apartments used to be around \$500, now they're \$700- 800 a month. Then they have pay tuition, which means paying monthly installments to pay the \$10,00- \$11,000. They go to summer school, and that's even more expensive. There's the meal plan, and then they have to pay the parking garage fee, which is about \$400- \$700 dollars, depending on the parking garage. That's a lot of money to be responsible for earning.

Although Iri effectively detailed the cost of the necessities, it still does not account for the other unexpected expenses that students may encounter. As a result, students who have grants and scholarships still end up taking out loans. For instance, Iri commented on the taking out loans, despite being advised not to by family. However, thinking it was normal, and now, looking back, she wishes she had not.

Some students, however, already have a plan-of-action to reduce their student loan debt. Quentin has already started a brokerage account; he's going to put those funds into savings and start investing. Though taking her medical entrance exams this semester, Zorah is going to take a gap year after graduating in May to find employment while living with her parents for a year to save money. This is in an effort to accumulate savings so as to not become overwhelmed with student loan debt for medical school. She commented that she only wants to use loans for school, not for other necessities, and stay in-state to pay less tuition. Although some of the participants seem to have a good grasp on their loans, some are already battling the horrors of student loan debt as the majority of the country is doing presently. Xenia divulged that she already has bad credit because of student loans, which will cause her not to purchase a car after graduation as her loans are already accumulating interest.

During the focus group, students discussed the possibility of UT providing financial literacy classes to help students, especially those from low income backgrounds, to manage their finances. They acknowledged it was a wealth gap because of the literacy gap. The largest debt in society is student loans, and students who are graduating as engineers even admitted to being a bit apprehensive about their future earnings and ability to pay student loans, along with other necessities.

Tinto's Theory of Departure notes that financial aid is one of the major reasons that students do not persist to graduation. Many students, specifically Black undergraduates, are using every form of financial aid to fund their education, with the

understanding that this debt to society continues for years to come postgraduation. The participants had to worry about not only being accepted in their classrooms and campus, but the stress level was magnified by the students having to continuously figure out how to financially remain in these very same classroom and campus environments.

Trying to balance academic responsibilities with employment schedules and being aware of the debt building up from the use of loans are financial side effects that continue to afflict Black undergraduate students during and after they graduate. Institutions continuing to increase the cost of tuition, including during the pandemic, further stresses these students who are already trying to manage their finances in an attempt to complete college. The added financial burden affects their academic performances, thus causing their ability to persist to be lowered.

### ***Minimizing Mental Health Needs***

Many times college students become overwhelmed with all the responsibilities that they voluntarily take on while in college. These stress-factors are further compounded when being a Black student as they are prone to experience both internal and external pressure in their academic, social, and personal lives.

Mental health resources were mentioned in quite a few student interviews. The participants often led high-impact lives as they are often dealing with academic stressors, being leaders in student organizations, working multiple jobs, being a typical college student, along with possible relationship issues. Loren suggested that there be more access to mental health resources, especially during high-level stress times such as during

midterms and finals. These resources are needed as students may try to resolve anxiety and stress in unhealthy ways.

Iri commented that during her academic journey there was a time when she had to find her identity. She admitted to putting other things and people before her needs. She lost herself in helping others and had to learn how to balance her life with others' expectations. The same thing occurred in Elle's life. She, too, was inundated with being a leader on campus, maintaining her academic responsibilities, and being a friend to her peers among other things. She took walks, prayed and tried to find a healthy balance between her life and the religious work she was doing to help others find peace.

Niobe and Wrae also had times in their lives where they could not find a stable balance, and so they both sought support from UT's Mental Health services. Unfortunately, they both had negative experiences. Niobe recalled the counselor writing of her personal issues as merely typical college trials that she just needed to move through. Wrae recalled getting a bad review about the health services, but still deciding to seek them for help. Once there, she said she spent almost an hour answering clerical questions instead of meeting with a therapist.

Niobe was fortunate enough to find a Black support group through the resource center that takes place for a few weeks, with meetings twice a week. She stated:

It really helped that they had a Black woman support group. I think that was such a transformation and process for me to actually be with other Black women that come from all backgrounds. Some were married, some were graduate students, but we were all in the same space meditating and doing mantras. It was really good and helpful.

Wrae, for her part, requested a Black therapist through the resource center, but was not able to have one as there was only one Black therapist on the staff. The therapist she was assigned could not fully connect with her and did not seem interested.

With the rise of mental health issues occurring because of the external-academic lives of students, especially Black students, it is imperative to understand through these experiences that Black undergraduates need resources to help them cope as they attempt to persist to graduation and persist in life postgraduation. These experiences are indicators that even those students who do adapt and join organizations still may feel isolated within themselves as they struggle to balance their internal and external stress factors.

Many of the factors causing the increase of mental stress have institutional origins. Attempting to remain academically competitive, feeling socially isolated, and being financially insecure are all issues further exacerbated by the institution not having structural policies set-up to help their Black undergraduates, who are disproportionately burdened with these issues. These issues are further compounded by not having proper mental health resources, in the form of not having a sufficient amount of therapists who students can racially identify with and who are sensitive and understanding to the needs of the students, both the internal and external stressors.

### **Summary of Findings from Section 2**

Participants in the study shared their academic barriers in terms of being underprepared for college colleges, coming to terms with having to take and pass developmental courses, having to revamp their previous study habits, and also having to

confront the problem of academic probation. The participants also explained the effects of not being able to identify and properly use the learning resources. Students, then, responded to the difficulties of being a Black undergraduate on a predominantly White college campus. They shared about being reserved to participate in class and in group projects because of feeling uncomfortable in classroom settings as most times being the only Black student. Students also discussed negative experiences, such as isolating professors and campus events. In addition, the financial barriers were presented, leading to the discussion of mental health resources and the need for Black counselors. In summary, findings from section two presented the multiple factors that can be barriers to persistence. In answering RQ #2, participants identified that being academically underprepared can be seen in varying areas of the academic realm, being a Black student causes unexpected negative experiences in the classroom and campus environment, and financial aid increases the pressure of being a student. Finally, the rise in mental health issues can be attributed to stressors like academics, finances, and discriminatory experiences. The next section continues with the discussion of the supportive factors encountered and their effects on students as they persisted to completion.

### **Section 3.**

#### **RQ3: How Do Senior-Level Black Students at UT Austin With Impending Graduation Dates Make Meaning of the Supporting Factors That Assisted Them in Their Ability to Persist?**

This section addresses the third research question and describes the students experiences with supportive factors that presented themselves as they persisted through college. This

section will explore the supportive factors in terms of several aspects that cause Black students to successfully integrate into the university by means of positive interaction through participation in student organizations and positive classroom environments, along with forming connections with mentors Black faculty/staff. It will also introduce financial aid as a supportive factor.

#### **Finding 4: Being Involved in Student Organizations Causes Students to Engage More in the Campus Environment**

##### ***The Nucleus of Persistence***

When Black students are successfully able to adapt and integrate into a predominantly White atmosphere, a lot of times it is because they have met other peers who share their race and/or joined an organization geared towards Black students. At UTA there are quite a few organizations that these students can choose from and become part of not only a friend group, but also an extended family to support them when they have both positive and negative experiences.

##### ***Family Within a Family***

Student participants named one particular place that has become the go-to place for Black undergraduates when they just want to be around peers who share their commonalities and day-to-day experiences on campus and in the classroom. Iri stated, “I am always gravitating towards people who look like me and share my traditional Black culture.” For Iri and other Black students to find that zone, they go to the center on campus named after a notable Black activist. In this lounge students are able to talk about life and college, listen to music, or study among walls that bare the pictures of other great

Black Civil Rights activists and scholars. As Elle mentioned, “It’s a safe space for us to cut in between classes and catch-up with friends and other Black students.” This space also has Black student organizations awards/material and creates a space for the organizations to post information about upcoming events.

These Black student organizations, inevitably, have become zones that have allowed students to learn and interact with other Black undergraduates, which many students is a rarity as seeing another Black student or being in class with one does not occur often. Elle stated, “I, along with others, would attend the Black organization for engineers just to meet other Black people. That wasn’t our major, but there wasn’t a space for us yet.”

Loren revealed that the honor society composed of Black students has become a home away from home. She stated:

The organization focuses on academic excellence and community engagement. We host Black caucuses for students to just talk about their experiences on campus as a Black student and we help to remediate issues. Black faculty and staff also give their points-of view.

The organization for Black computer scientists has become that space for Wrae. She noted:

I wanted to be around more Black people in my major. It’s just a small group of us, maybe 30 of us, but we’re definitely glad we found each other. In our organization, we’re really committed to helping Black students get resources, find jobs and internships in the field, and one of the major driving points is helping the underclassmen be a part of the community because we all know how they feel.

Black students often times create their spaces when there are not any that represent what



they feel are needed for Black students. For instance, that is one of the reasons a Black spirit group was founded by Xenia. She remarked, “I noticed there weren’t any spirit groups for Black students to just be themselves and take part in the traditions at UT. It’s an organization where our peers come together and share our college experiences and think of ways to both have fun and help each other. Some of my dearest, lifelong friends are in the organization that I’ve met at UT.”

For these participants, student organizations have not only allowed them to find peers, but also, many of the students were able to form mentorships as a result of the organizations. These students were supported emotionally and mentally through the connections created from their involvement in the organizations. These students were not only able to help each other, but also were able to extend that support to other undergraduates and people in the community to assist them in being successful. These organizations provided the setting needed for these students to go beyond simply adapting to the campus community, but they also used these existing spaces, and created new spaces, to help others adapt and feel a part of UTA based on what they thought others needed using the participants’ prior positive and negative experiences on campus and in the surrounding community. Having the institution’s support when needing to develop or expand organizations that serve to enhance cultural purposes or provide race-focused campus and community initiatives is advantageous for Black students as they feel supported by their chosen college to create spaces that will continue to support incoming students.

### ***Mirror Representation***

The study participants all agreed that they would have liked to have had a mentor so that they could have someone help them successfully navigate college life and give them guidance when they encountered issues during their academic journey. Some of the participants were paired with mentors through the TIP program, such as Zorah and Wrae, and they mentioned that those tutors were nice and helpful with general class information, but they were not able to connect beyond the basic level. In particular, the study participants all wanted a mentor who was of the same race as them. Loren stated:

I just feel like there might be a disconnect. For instance, I may be explaining a struggle that I'm having that they may not be able to understand. It's not necessarily from a negative way, they just can't understand. Sometimes, because of who you are, it's understood.

Patrick also explained the importance of having a mentor who identifies as a Black person too. He added:

You have to be the same race to at least have a deep understanding of the same struggles that I've gone through, so even if you never experienced it, you definitely know what happens and how to navigate through certain areas. You want to be able to tell someone something, and they get it because they experienced it or at least understand it.

Students discussed how they would have actually wanted more than one tutor to share both the academic and the social topics. Loren suggested having both a faculty and a student mentor. As Zorah mentioned that it would have been nice to have someone walk her through graduate school applications and then have another connection about other topics. As Niobe reiterated, she stated that it would have been valuable to have a Black woman mentor to fill in the gaps from the very beginning. She said that it would have been helpful to have someone talk to her about academic resources, study habits as well

as how to communicate with others in the classroom and deal with being a minority on campus.

The problem with Black undergraduates having a Black mentor is that there are fewer Black administrators/faculty/staff than there are students, so many times the faculty/staff members do not have the time needed to take on more mentees as they are most likely already overextending themselves beyond their work responsibilities. Iri, having noticed this issue, provided helpful feedback. She remarked:

The university has more than enough money, more than enough resources and opportunity, more than enough of everything. I genuinely think that a lot of the work that needs to be done for Black students can only be done by other Black faculty/staff. That means that the university needs to help retain them. They should pay them for being mentors or give them leeway with their other work projects to allow them to do the work that you need them to do, which is to help retain these undergraduate Black students who are willing to go here. They need to pay them for their labor because it can become taxing.

Quentin and Zorah both have been fortunate to have connected with Black faculty members. Zorah shared that one of her Black professors would connect race and how it translated into student life at UT in the classroom, but he also would have race conversations outside of class relating it to the artwork in the Black Studies department. Quentin acknowledged the Black faculty who set up meetings on Mondays in the Heman Sweat center. He said the convenience of them reaching out and becoming mentors by sharing their standpoints is needed. He said a lot of students may not sign-up and go to the peer mentor programs the college offers, so this set-up is very useful.

Elle connected with her mentor by taking a chance and engaging with her after class. Although fearful of possibly disrespecting her professor by being overly familiar, she did not want to miss the opportunity. She expressed, “To have a professor who shares

the same culture as me was so worthwhile. She has been a wonderful mentor, helping me find an internship and writing recommendation letters for me.”

Fortunately, Black students can often connect with Black faculty/staff members when they encounter them while in the college’s division facility geared towards diversity. Iri declared:

I notice that in the pipeline for Black educators and administrators there are less and less of them as the positions go higher and higher. However, to see Black deans and vice-presidents when I am in the diversity division, it makes me feel that I could do it too. Representation is really a thing. Also, when some faculty/staff come to our student organizational meetings and give out their phone numbers, it really shows that they care about cultivating their community. They are great about coming to the organizations and their events to talk with students.

In fact, Iri’s mentor works in the diversity division, and she said he has helped her develop her leadership skills and with other college matters dealing with race throughout the years. Loren’s mentor also has many high-ranking roles at the university, but he has been able to spend time with her discussing “what it means to be a part of the small population on campus and how that bothers her and also overcoming the struggles of being a Black student on campus.”

Wrae also talked about not only connecting with Black faculty/staff, but also meeting other Black students while being in the diversity division. She stated, “It was just like seeing another Black student in the computer lab across the room, you see them and just start a connection. We share resources about internships, tutor each other, and just basically helping our community.” Sometimes, students form a mentoring relationship with upperclassmen as a result of not having a formal mentor. Quentin noted:

A lot of times your friends can't really give you advice because they're in the same boat as you. I didn't have anyone playing a dominant role in consistently guiding me at college, but a lot of upperclassmen helped me along the way.

An upper class person also filled in to mentor Elle as well. They connected because of having the same major, and her mentor was able to provide her with information regarding her major in law and just typical college topics to help her navigate through UT.

Students also shared that identifying with Black alumni helped provide them with resources and information and filled in the gaps of not having a Black mentor at the college. They explained that there were two groups of Black alumni, one is directly connected to UTA while the other is external to the college and has chapters across the nation. The participants explained that homecoming is the event to connect with the Black alumni, along with the ones who work at the university. Students in the focus group noted that "Black alumni really do care. They invest in the Black students at UT and in the programs that help them succeed." Loren expressed:

Black homecoming is the premier event for the Black community because people come out with their families, and you get to hear different stories from the alumni. You see a lot of them on campus beyond just tailgating and the football game.

Xenia mentioned that they come to speak with the student organizations, and sometimes, they come to the different institutions for Black students. Zorah recalled going to homecoming with her parents growing up and now, experiencing the importance of it even more. She remarked:

It's such a great experience. It's typically a week long, and we usually have a specific day to try to get alumni connected back to their various fields with the students and their

professional organizations in collaboration with each other. We host networking events, and then on Saturday, we have fun and connect during tailgating. This year we did virtual events, but it was still great.

### ***Being an Example***

Though Black students often may not have a formal mentor of the same race, they do often find time to help their fellow Black undergraduates. Niobe mentioned:

I would have loved to have had a mentor who looks like me. I think just aligning students even with other students could be beneficial. It could be like a rite-of-passage that before you leave, you mentor a student; that would be a big help. The university could pay the students to be a part of it.

A majority of the student participants became mentors because of their leadership roles in their student organizations. Elle mentioned that being a mentor has helped her become more confident and realizing that she does have valuable information that can others.

Quentin mentioned:

I mentor several people now who are in my same major. I spend a lot of time with them, and I think about how I wish I had known these things that I share with them earlier. I want to help them get to where I am but at a bigger point.

Many of the participants expressed how being a mentor has caused them to become better students, Brione added that being a mentor has caused her to work harder on her studies.

She shared:

I now feel like I have to bring up my end of the table. I feel like they are watching me, so I have to finish my assignments and projects. I want them to see that I have internships and producing things, so they'll do it as well.

Some of the students not only mentor through their student organizations, but also through their scholarship programs. Loren shared that helping the undergraduates has caused her to be more vocal too and realize that there are people who are looking up

to you. You are a student and a mentor; it just makes you a better person. Zorah now mentors Black undergraduates through a program that helps students with professional development and self-identity as a student.

The student participants also reach out to the future Black students hoping to enroll at UTA. Iri mentors high schoolers and talks with them about college, future careers they may not know exist, homework matters, and any other issues that they need someone to talk to about in their lives. Wrae mentors high school students as well and has the privilege of bringing the students to the campus through her student organization as a leader to let them explore the computer science department and talk to them about the possibilities of being in a STEM program. She explained that she wants them to have that experience that may not be possible for them, to just be able to come to a college campus and see the different workings of it in real time.

When students have mentors, especially those that look like them and may share common experiences, it provides them with a safety net to fall back on when they are confronted with academic or social matters instead of experiencing things unnecessarily by trial and error. Astin's Theory of Involvement backs the concept that when Black students are involved in student organizations and have mentors their ability to adapt and meet their targeted goals are more likely to as they have outlets that are helping them to grow as students and people. By UTA investing in the recruitment of more Black faculty, staff, and administrators, it directly sends the message to students that they are attempting to rectify the ratio problem that is causing many Black students to not have intraracial

mentorships. As noted, these pairings have a major role in Black student persistence, so it is a matter that does need to be addressed by the university.

### ***Educational Life Support***

Though financial aid is often considered a barrier as most affiliate it with student loans, which have proven to be a major detriment to outgoing college graduates' intended lifestyles based on their expected financial earnings. With Black students relying heavily on securing careers with significant financial output that traditionally has provided support for not only them, but for their family members as well who are in need or who may have financially aided them throughout their college years.

Elle was one of those students who was fortunate enough to have her parents' support even though she has employment and grants awarded to her. She added:

I have two younger siblings who are also attending college at this time. My parents try to give us monthly allowances to help us out with our finances. My parents have always been very helpful; my dad has been so generous. There's never been a time when I needed money, and he would say he didn't have it. Even when I tried to pay for my stuff, my parents would tell me not to worry about it, and they would reimburse me.

Niobe's parents also supported her by purchasing groceries and even giving her their card to purchase what she needed. In addition to that, she was able to pay for her tuition by using her high school graduation gifts while her parents paid for housing her freshman year. Wrae was also able to use saved money as well to finance her college expenses. She stated:

My freshman year I saved all my money from an internship I had with a major company that I used to pay my housing and tuition for my sophomore year. Then, the next summer I was earning even more money from my internship at a major technology company. I was able then to save that money and pay for my tuition the following semester.



Quentin and Loren have also effectively been able to navigate the financial world of college. Earning multiple scholarships, Quentin considers himself to have been privileged to be able to focus on his academics by studying late at night and having free time unlike his peers who had to use their free time to work. Loren was also able to use scholarships and stipends to become one of another small minority of students as she won't have any student loans to repay after graduation.

These students, therefore, have not only been able to persist and complete their studies at a top university, but also doing it without amassing a great amount of debt, if any. Although the Tinto's Theory of Departure clearly outlines the effects of financial needs while in academic progress and the effects postcompletion, financial assistance is still considered a supporting factor. Despite the burden it may present when repaying the funds back, it is still considered a tool of support as without it, the students would not have been able to remain at UTA. Those financial tools that do not require repayment, such as scholarships and grants, are even more of a support for these students. Institutional support through the coordination of more work study opportunities for students as well as internships that provide students with not only funding, but work experience too, can also be tools of support. With UTA's support, many Black undergraduates will be able to focus on their academic goals and persist to completion.

### **Summary of Findings from Section 3**

In Section 3, participants shared how their student organizations serve as means to interact with other Black students, mentors are great tools of support to help with college issues, and financial aid can be a positive factor when it provides a positive pathway to

attending college. Findings from Section 3 include the factor that student organizations now go beyond the norm of just being essential for socializing, mentors fill in the gap between student and college atmosphere that proves to be in demand as the guidance is invaluable, and financial aid can be a source of postcollege financial freedom.

#### ***Summary of Chapter IV***

Adapting to being on a predominantly White campus was a barrier that the Black student participants encountered, whether they graduated from a majority Black high school or a diverse high school. Most of them found themselves having to not only experience the typical newly-independent self-discovery phase of figuring out their individuality, but it was compounded with being a Black person who often integrated the classroom, dormitory, other campus settings. These participants found themselves having to learn how to be representative of themselves and their opinions and not that of the entire race when participating in class, if they even felt comfortable enough to be active learners. Some participants from diverse backgrounds were placed in positions where they felt they needed to be surrounded by their same-race peers after being thought of as outcasts or being mistreated by other members of the campus population, putting them in an unknown predicament as they were accustomed to being able to socialize with varying races of people.

Being fearless and independent transferred into the financial aspects of their college experiences as well. Most of the Black undergraduates had to find employment, sometimes two forms of it, to meet their financial obligations. Although the majority of the participants had grants and scholarships, most often more than one type, they still

needed to use student loans as financial aid. This caused many of them to have an unhealthy balance of work and academic responsibilities even though most of the students worked on campus in work-study positions. Tryg to manage finances served to exacerbate the other barriers of being academically underprepared. A few of the students were a part of the cohort of students who were required to take developmental courses, and there were also those who were not mandated to developmental classes but still struggled academically. The students did not have the privilege of just being a regular college student with just regular stress; their stress was multiplied because of the varying barriers.

Fortunately, student organizations and mentors became the needed supporting factors that assisted these students in navigating through the negative experiences and providing them with positive experiences that enabled them to feel a part of the university. These students, when given the opportunity to feel included, used resources to further support their goals and the goals of others. Much like the other supportive factors, financial assistance provided students with some financial strain, which allowed them to exert their energy to being successful students and persisting to graduation.

Overall, chapter four presented a common point-of-view common of Black undergraduates across the nation; however, that factor makes it still one of concern. Most might predict that those Black students, graduating from diverse schools in the top-ten% academic ranking, and seemingly adapting into the campus culture, by leading and founding student organizations, would have an entirely different college experience at a predominantly White university, especially one with arguably the best resources for

students, but they did not. These student participants encountered the common barriers and used the common supportive factors as other Black collegiate students nationally. Therefore, it is imperative that UTA recognize that there are still gaps in the system that need to be filled by properly identifying the major issues and then developing and creating college policies and procedures to assist in resolving these matters.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION**

The preceding chapters presented emergent themes from the following three broad research questions:

1. How do senior-level Black students at UTA with impending graduation dates describe their college knowledge prior to enrolling?
2. How do senior-level Black students at UTA with impending graduation dates make meaning of the barriers they encountered during their college experience?
3. How do senior-level Black students at UTA with impending graduation dates make meaning of the supporting factors that assisted them in their ability to persist?

In this chapter, a summary of the findings is presented based on the theoretical framework as well as relevant literature. This study discussed the experiences of Black undergraduate senior-level students and the supportive factors and barriers they encountered as they persisted to their impending graduation date. These findings offer insight into how Black students make meaning of their college experience based on their surrounding environment.

The first section of this chapter will present major findings that emerged from Chapter 4's analysis. Then, the implications and recommendations for practice and policy in higher education will be presented. The next section will discuss the limitations related to the study's methodology and student participant sampling, followed by a proposal of

future research. Lastly, the personal reflection section will be provided based on perspective and experiences in the academy.

### **Major Finding 1: Institutional Inability to Implement Transitional Systems for Academic Success**

One of the major findings of the research indicated that many students entered their college level courses with the false sense of being academically prepared only to learn that their pre-college academic courses did not effectively prepare them. Although it may be somewhat understandable to estimate that this situation may occur to those students already performing and ranking academically lower than their cohort of students, it is not necessarily the case. Some of these students had been continuously enrolled in advanced placement classes. The difference in the type of academic setting, whether it was a magnet or charter high school or a high school geared towards specific career paths, some of these students found themselves struggling to understand new learning concepts because of not being introduced to the basic level information in high school. As a result, some of the students found themselves having to upgrade their study habits and basically teach themselves the material that was not available or inaccessible during their college preparatory years.

Research indicates that this academic disparity may occur for various reasons, including the lack of time to teach the information or the lack of advanced educational material (Sewell & Goings, 2020). Being academically underprepared presents many challenges as Astin's Theory of Involvement explains that students who cannot adapt to the curriculum or the classroom academic setting typically have negative experiences,

and those negative experiences of lacking basic study skills and struggling to meet college standards make them prone to withdraw from their institutions as Tinto's Theory of Departure predicts for students. These discrepancies could also be a result of low-funded school systems, especially in low-income environments as some of the participants indicated that their high schools did not have all of the necessary resources. When students are in low-income areas, the schools tend to be as well further weakening the academic performance of students (Rothstein, 2014). In fact, on average dominant White school districts are being funded more than \$2000 dollars more per student than predominantly minority school districts (Amour, 2020). It is then understandable that there will be learning obstacles even with these students being the top academic performers in their graduating high school cohorts.

Though these academic gaps that Black undergraduates were experiencing were initially created by their college preparatory institutions, it is still the responsibility of UTA to implement systems that are set to minimize these educational gaps so that these students can be successful. UTA must design its own process to help guide these students who they have recruited and admitted into the institution. The institution must support these students and help them to become progressive learners so that they are able to meet the institution's expected requirements and be competitive learners.

### **Major Finding 2: Lack of Institution's Ability to Reduce Academic Deficits**

Learning resource centers, such as learning labs, computer labs, and writing centers, are created as means for supporting students' academic needs. However, these resources become barriers when students either did not have knowledge of their existence

or did not know how to properly use them, or otherwise what to expect when going to receive support. Several of the study's participants disclosed that they did not learn about these resources until after their grades had already been affected. UTA must be proactive with informing its minority population of students about available learning resources and the policies and procedures that using these resources entail as to not have them involved in negative experiences because of not understanding the steps. The institution cannot passively allow its Black students to fall into academic distress before unveiling these substantial academic support systems.

Others mentioned that although they knew of the extended teaching tools, they did not encounter supportive tutors who met them at their academic level or could connect with them. This, then, causes a problem that further exacerbates the already existing issue of not understanding the subject material. Astin's Theory of Involvement reinforces the concept that students are more likely to persist and complete their studies when they interact and adapt to the classroom environment. That, however, is not possible when there are still sections of the material not figured out, causing them to not want to participate. Students mentioned it was difficult to participate in and engage with their fellow peers and professor, so add-on the issue of being slightly ill-prepared further magnifies the issue. Research shows that when students are able to build a rapport with their selected tutor, the tutor is better equipped to address curriculum difficulties by understanding how to approach the students' learning needs (Nelson, 2010). There, then, affects not only the academic standing of the students, but also their consideration of remaining enrolled. This is an institutional matter that UTA is responsible for in selecting



the tutors and making sure they are adequately prepared to communicate with and help students of varying backgrounds without any biases.

Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome Model asserts that learning resources are needed to supplement classroom learning and basically reinforce the academic skills the students already acquired in their pre-college experiences. Tinto's Theory of Departure reinforces that if these students do not properly use these learning resources, it continues to negatively affect their learning ability leading them to noncompletion of their academic studies. The sooner students seek help from tutors, they not only improve their ability to have academic achievement, they improve their chances of reaching their academic goals.

### **Major Finding 3: Institutional Inability to Foster Inclusive Practices in Classroom Environments**

Astin's Theory of Involvement details that one of the essential components of Black students persisting is being able to successfully adapt to their environments, especially in their classroom environments. However, the student participants reported that there were many times that the color of their skin presented unnecessary barriers for them, from both their peers and their professors.

Being excluded from peer groups or not feeling confident to actively learn in the classroom versus being a passive learner was because of microaggressions encountered because of being Black. These microaggressions took form for the participants in the manner of having their intelligence questioned in the classrooms, in both the general class setting and in group projects. Research states that there are circumstances where White

students treat Black students as if their admittance to colleges was not because of their academic achievement, but rather the universities meeting their required diversity quotas (Long, 2016). Cultural assumptions cause Black students to have negative experiences as well as the cultural burden of being appointed as the representative of the race. Participants discussed how it caused them to feel uncomfortable and mindful of what they expressed in class as it would not be attributed to them, but rather considered the perspective of all Black people.

As a result, when professors presented academic material that focused on Black experiences or attempted to align the subject matter to the Black race, it created anxiety for the participants. Several of the students in the focus group pointed out that some professors need diversity training to better understand how to present the material, engage all the students, and not put minority students in awkward situations. Research states that because of the recent racial tensions, colleges and educators need to thoughtfully think about their actions so they are not complicit or continue to allow racism to exist (Watts, 2021). Having to experience these types of situations impacts a student's ability to identify as an individual and experience college in that way only.

It is then UTA's role to establish guidelines for its faculty to practice inclusive teaching methods that work to include all students in every subject matter, instead of isolating students, specifically based on their race. Classroom environments and the culture of them created by both the professors and students need to foster and encourage students to be active learners instead of diminishing their academic confidence. The institution is accountable for educating all of its students in a productive environment that

maximizes their knowledge and skills, and this cannot be minimized for Black students because of noninclusive classroom atmospheres.

#### **Major Finding 4: Being Involved in Student Organizations Causes Students to Engage More in the Campus Environments**

Another supportive factor that many interviewees mentioned were the student organizations they were either members of or served as leaders in during their undergraduate journey. Most of them point to the student organizations as safe spaces where they can interact with other students of their race as the opportunity was often not possible in classes or on campus as they were so few in number. Research shows that Black students need spaces to escape the trauma and the emotional exhaustion that is triggered by being a student on a predominantly White campus (Dennis, 2020). Students stated that while they were a part of other organizations dealing with their degree majors, they purposefully sought out organizations that were dominantly Black students to have a group of people who understood their experiences in and outside of the classroom and who shared common backgrounds with them. These student organizations served as their homes away from home as they maneuvered their college environment. That being noted, campus organizations have now transformed from being simply social zones, but also centers of mental health. Most of the student participants indicated that their organization where the prime places that sought out when they had negative classroom and/or campus experiences. These organizations have also begun to host activities that focus on the students discussing their ability to adapt as Black students to their surroundings. Ukiomogbe (2020) reveals that Black student organizations are now having to take on

major issues because of the increasing racial injustice issues and the ensuing protests. As a result, Black students are leaning on each other for guidance and support as the external factors of campus life now have begun to entangle with their internal campus lives. This new adjustment aligns with the Theory of Involvement as it asserts that Black students are less likely to feel isolated when in direct contact with other peers who share their common experiences.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

The findings from the research study signal to multiple areas that institutions as a whole, including administrators, faculty, staff and other students, can work to create or revamp to better serve Black undergraduate students. The discussion suggesting recommendations for practice is presented, and then, the implication for policy efforts and updates to strengthen supporting factors and minimize barriers for Black students in four-year institutions are given.

#### **Implication for Practice**

A practice that needs revamping in an effort to support more undergraduate Black students is the process of assigning mentors. Many programs have created systems of pairing mentors with incoming students. Although this is a beneficial and commendable act, more effort needs to be put into place to help identify mentors who are more aligned with the students' race and/or socioeconomic backgrounds so that the students can build a connection with their mentors and foster a relationship that helps the students become successful.

Although most student participants did not have formal mentors, they did have informal mentors or people who served as space fillers to help them navigate their college journey. These mentors provided a substantial amount of support for the students and were able to help them from a place of familiarity as they, too, had once been in the zones of the students. The majority of the mentors were Black, and it is with intention that these students, in spite of socioeconomic background, sought these persons out and took the chance of engaging with these individuals as a means of both social and academic survival.

Some participants indicated that they were assigned mentors, but the relationship declined until it was nonexistent. Research indicates that most often White faculty can only empathize with the Black students' struggles and challenges whereas Black faculty members may be able to understand their lived experiences as they, too, may have experienced them (Moore & Tolliver, 2010). When students are able to form connections with same-race faculty/staff/administrators, they are more likely to continue the partnership and use the gained information to become successful students. This is also noted in a recent student regarding nonminority mentors being paired with minority students. It suggests that mentors of a different race may cause further stress to students as they may reduce the significance of the students' 'social identity' (Cornwall, 2020). It is important that students are able to confide in individuals who do not excuse their experiences as trivial, but understand the gravity of what students are internally accepting. Research further conveys that because of possible 'cultural mistrust' Black

students may not divulge their problems and share their what they are dealing with in life, which complicated the intended relationship of support (Cornwall, 2020).

### **Implications for Policy**

Expanding policies of diversity and inclusion was a major theme among the participants in the study. It was continuously noted that the institution needs to significantly increase the amount of Black faculty, staff, and administrators as student participants expressed the need to be able to have tutors, professors, and mental health counselors who are of the same race. Often, the students' negative experiences revolved around the issue that the people who were in positions to support their academic journey often could not identify with them and their experiences. If more Black faculty, staff, and administrators were present in these arenas, it would have alleviated some of the stress the students experienced. As Astin's Theory of Involvement conveys, Black students adapt and achieve at a greater rate when there are others who they can interact with as mentors, in student services, or educate them in their classrooms. Clauson and McKnight (2018) note that colleges need to actively create campus communities that are inclusive and equitable. They further mention that the support of student diversity contributes to both the intellectual and cultural lives of the student body population.

Through UTA's recently unveiled plan of promoting diversity on campus, sets the stage for the university to purposely recruit and retain not only Black students, but Black members in every aspect of the campus community. This policy change is supported by research such as Flaherty (2020) assertion that more Black faculty and staff are needed in higher education as the small percentage in academia are becoming more

and more dissatisfied with having to fully function as faculty, with all of its expected responsibilities, without the needed time or compensation. These same faculty members are also charged with mentoring students, further adding to their seemingly unlimited workload. The need for more Black faculty on college campuses, especially predominantly White campuses such as UTA is a targeted goal to not only alleviate the burden of the Black faculty, but more importantly, to provide Black students with those members of the campus population who they feel they can identify with while trying to persist to completion.

Another policy that needs to be revamped is the registration process of undergraduate developmental education students. Several of the participating Black seniors communicated that the registration procedure was one of defeat. Students with a higher number of college course credits are allowed to register first, giving them more accessibility to secure their needed courses and options to fit their schedules. The interviewees noted that this further displaced them from graduating in a timely manner as they register last, but are the ones that need to make up ground for at least one semester of not being enrolled in a college-credit course. Those who were mandated to take developmental courses as prerequisites to their college credit courses stated that these classes already put them, at least one or two semesters, behind their beginning cohort members. Consequently, it also put them lower in the registration process. As a result, they stated that when they were able to access the system, most of their required classes were completely full and closed and/or the class options were conflicting in days/times. This caused them to have to wait another semester, or sometimes two, to register for the

courses, thus pushing them even further back from a four-year completion rate. Adding on two more years creating a six-year completion target further multiplied their stress because of the inability to afford more years of college and all their other necessities. Some of the students mentioned that at least two of their friends simply withdrew as they did not foresee how to continue with already being hindered by having to take developmental courses and now having to figure out an unexpected financial strain. This policy needs to be revamped as a means of supporting all undergraduates and not becoming a detriment to those students already struggling to persist to the second year of college without having to withdraw.

Preston (2017) parallels the students' assessment as he mentions that developmental students must pay for a series of noncredit classes that are not even counted as part of the college completion requirements. He, too, agrees that money for tuition continues to increase as these students continue to try to reach completion within less than six years.

Instead of students being pushed to lengthening their undergraduate years, and consequently, having to increase student loan debt or withdraw because of the frustration of seemingly not progressing, the university could create an advisor plan-of-action. The students would be required to meet with their advisors pre-registration periods to view the earned grades of that semester and discuss the plan-of-action, regarding learning resources and/or advisor check-ins, to minimize the students possibility of academically falling behind. This then allows them to register with other students at their academic level. It will also help the advisors and students keep track of their degree maps to make



sure they are staying on course and taking courses in recommended order, not just enrolling in courses because they are the only ones not closed to enrollment. This course of action would better serve the developmental students and assist them to completion instead of simply taking their required developmental course(s) and then putting together an unrealistic schedule based on what courses are left and not the courses they need.

Developmental education students are already at a default when entering college with many of them not having dual credit courses, which would allow students to move through their core courses at a quicker pace. Therefore, allowing them to register in a timely manner provides them with a better chance at graduating in less than six years.

### **Future Research**

This study revealed emerging barriers because of environmental changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing racial injustices being presented on a national stage. Though most of the barriers are parallel to those that were presenting obstacles pre-pandemic and social justice activism, it would be important for universities to observe and do research on the effects of these external issues to provide Black students with the needed resources to overcome them. Without the policies and procedures put in place to combat these challenges, it could lower their ability to persist to graduation.

In terms of the effects of COVID-19, Black students were forced to unexpectedly confront many financial disparities that existed between them and nonminority students. Many of them did not have the technological resources needed to not only attend classes, but also to do the required academic work. These resources ranged from personal

computers, science lab tools, and printing/copying devices that were previously available in the campus resource centers. In addition, Laidler (2020) notes that Black students lost access to systems designed to help support their academic studies. Being in remote environments took away their access and sense of having a community being available to their needs and providing some form of accountability. Dealing with the uncertainty of COVID-19, health concerns further increased the students' level of stress. Black students were dealing with a higher level of mental issues because of the virus disproportionately affecting the Black community, causing more of them to deal with more deaths among family, mostly an effect of pre-existing health inequities in health care (Slay, 2020).

Another direction that this research could explore would be the barriers and supportive factors that Black students encounter and experience because of the national movement focusing on the racial injustices in today's society. Due to these events, Black students are now being put in unexpected positions to answer race-matter questions or be confronted by people or things that exhibit racist viewpoints. These issues can cause students to turn that anger into becoming actively involved in social activism (Laidler, 2020). However, this want and need to become involved can cause them to remove their focus from their own academic and mental health issues to help others make a difference in the nation (Anderson, 2020). As a result of the national climate, colleges are now actively working on encouraging diversity and creating more inclusive campus communities.

To add to the newly developed research centered on how these external national factors are affecting the internal college environments, the research could be expanded to

explore the perspectives of Black undergraduate students on varying types of campuses in the Austin area, including an historically Black university in comparison to this top-ranked predominantly White university. It would only be appropriate to get the diverse viewpoints and really explore how the supportive factors and barriers develop and transform based on the varying types of campus environments and the composition of the student and faculty/staff populations.

### **Limitations**

One of the most significant limitations is the inability to interview the students who did indeed withdraw from the institution. Speaking with these students would get to the core of why students, in particular Black students, make the ultimate decision to withdraw. Did they use all of the resources available to them to continue to completion? Did they know about the student support services before making the decision? Did they feel the administrators/faculty/staff, both at the pre-college level and the college level, prepare and provide them with the needed information to be successful? The basis of the research is to identify the barriers and supportive factors to help students persist, so the students who should be sharing their experiences in conjunction with these students are the ones who did not persist. Afterall, these are the students who were admitted into a nationally top-ranked university, had academic goals leading to a career, and, then ultimately, made the decision to withdraw or exhausted the options available to them to remain at the college and proceed in their academic studies.

Another limitation was the inability to get a wider range of Black student diversity because of COVID-19 obstacles. The pandemic cautionary rules and procedures

eliminated multiple recruitment strategies, such as speaking directly with students during their monthly student organizational meetings and at campus activities. The students also had limited time to do interviews and participate in the focus group because of their employment obligations and trying to maintain their academic responsibilities. Students were under great pressure to function as normal in these areas as well as continue to attend student organizational meetings as leaders and deal with their personal lives. As a result, it was not possible to have more than eleven students and participants who represented an even larger scope of the diverse Black undergraduate population at UTA.

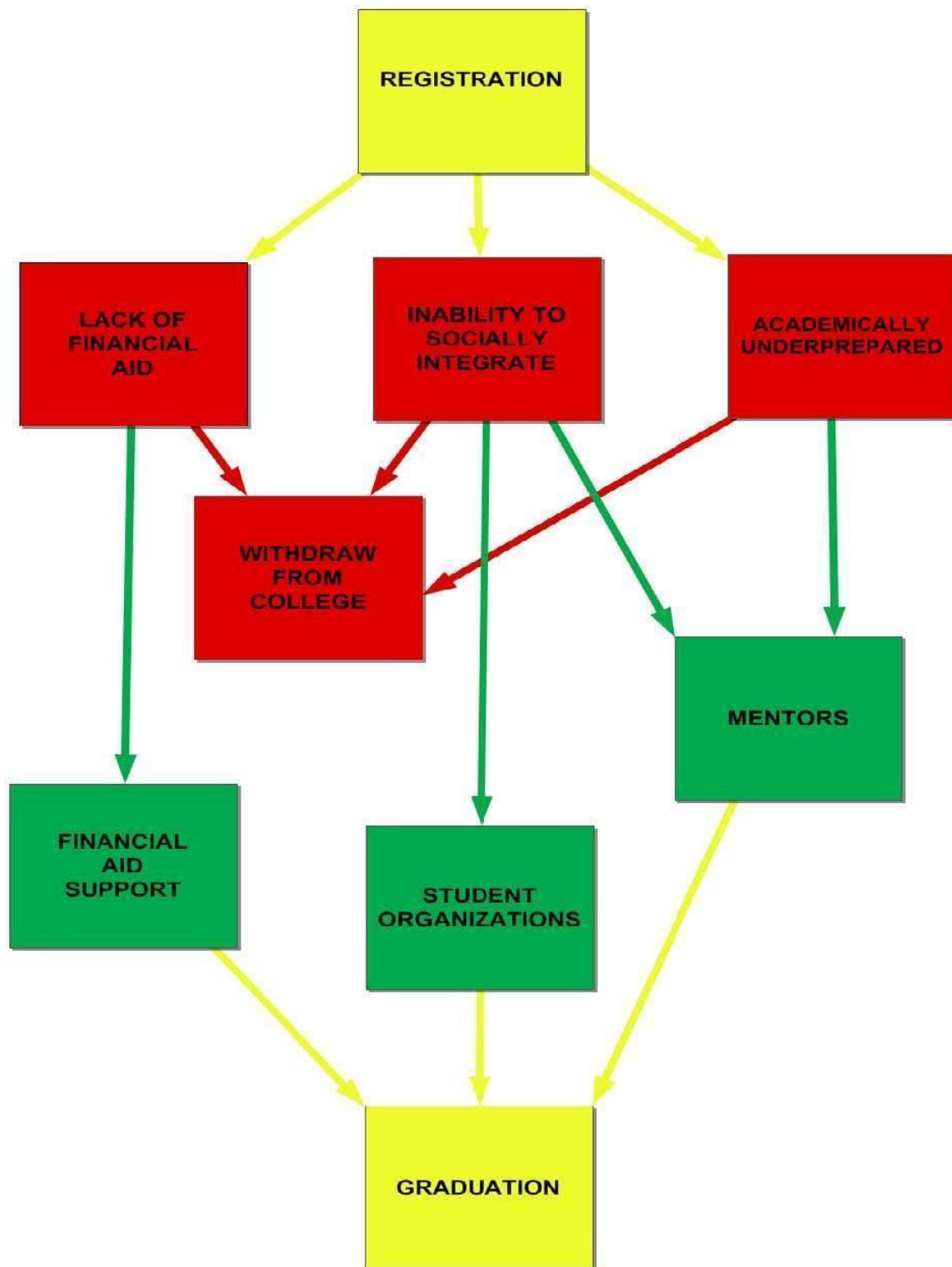
### **Conclusion: Personal Reflections**

This study revealed that Black undergraduate students continue to negotiate college life through trial and error, despite being top-ranked high school graduates, leaders and founders of student organizations, and mentors to fellow undergraduates while attending UTA, an institution with seemingly endless resources for student success. Despite socioeconomic and academic backgrounds, being a first-generation student or not, still does not negate the fact that the majority of Black students still have a difficult time adjusting because of financial, academic and/or social pressures.

The blueprint for Black undergraduates is basically nonexistent as every college has its own culture; therefore, students must be prepared to adapt and mentally move through their college experiences in an effort to not only help themselves, but the upcoming Black students who will inevitably have to navigate these same steps as they may encounter some of the same issues as the barriers seem to be revolving doors for Black undergraduate students.

The students in this study are graduating and moving on to medical and law schools, to graduate schools for engineering and communication, as well beginning careers in business and computer science at top ranked universities and companies. They have created and expanded resources that assisted them in completing their undergraduate studies, and hopefully, the upcoming undergraduates will do the same until one day the barriers are diminished. To have this occur, the university must also continue to take initiative to provide, identify, and introduce its Black undergraduates to the resources needed to persist.

The UTA is actively taking the course of actions to recruit and retain not only Black students, but also the Black administrators, faculty and staff members needed to create the supportive community that minimizes negative experiences and further maximizes the positive outcomes. In 1956, UTA admitted its first group of Black undergraduates; it included 111 students. Only 6.1% of the expected graduating class of 2024 are Black undergraduates. These numbers and percentages can only continue to increase if the proper mechanisms are implemented to promote the persistence of Black students at the UTA as they navigate their journey from registration to graduation.



## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Pre-Interview Questionnaire

#### Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this interview study. Please take 10-15 minutes to complete this brief questionnaire. Please note that you will be assigned a pseudonym (fictitious name) in the final version of this research project. Please **PRINT** all information & mark each response with an 'X.'

#### Personal Information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Race:

Do you identify as African American/Black? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

#### Educational Information:

University: \_\_\_\_\_ Major/Minor: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you classified as a senior in college? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

First-Semester & Year enrolled at current college?

Fall \_\_\_\_ Spring \_\_\_\_ Summer \_\_\_\_ Year 20\_\_

Estimated Graduation Date: \_\_\_\_\_(Semester/Year)

Grade Point Average: \_\_\_\_\_

**Residential Info:** Use Financial Aid? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Residence Hall: \_\_\_\_\_ (If Yes): Scholarship: \_\_\_\_\_

Off-Campus Apartment: \_\_\_\_\_ Grants: \_\_\_\_\_

Family: \_\_\_\_\_ Loans: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Study: \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Employment:**

Are you employed? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

How many hours per week? \_\_\_\_\_

**Student Organizations:** Are you a member of any? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Please list all organizations you are/have been involved in during college?

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

**Family:** Do you have children? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ How many? \_\_\_\_\_

**\*Please indicate the highest level of your parents' or legal guardians' educational background\***

**Father's educational level** **Mother's educational level**

No high school \_\_\_\_\_ No high school \_\_\_\_\_

Some high school \_\_\_\_\_ Some High School \_\_\_\_\_

High School Diploma/GED \_\_\_\_\_ High School Diploma/GED \_\_\_\_\_

Trade/Vocational Certificate \_\_\_\_\_ Trade/Vocational Certificate \_\_\_\_\_

Associate Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Associate Degree \_\_\_\_\_

Bachelor Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Bachelor Degree \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate/Professional Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate/Professional Degree \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have siblings? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, did any of them attend a four-year college? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, did they graduate? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix B: First Interview Protocol**

**Student's Pseudonym:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**University:** \_\_\_\_\_

### **{ Present Letter of Informed Consent }**

*Thank you for participating in this study. As previously discussed, I am attempting to explore the supporting factors and barriers that occur for Black students at UT Austin during the persistence of acquiring a degree. This is the first of two interviews. In this interview, I would like to learn about your personal history before enrolling into college.*

*Before we begin this interview, I want to assure you that your anonymity will be upheld. Your identity will not be revealed either verbally or in writing in my analysis and reporting. Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?*

### **{ Begin digital recorder }**

*This interview serves as a time for you to share your personal history leading up to your college experience. These questions will focus on your life and surrounding environment before you enrolled and persisted to becoming an upcoming college graduate.*

1. Tell me about yourself.
  - a. What city and state were you raised during your childhood?
  - b. What is the composition of your immediate family unit?
  - c. Describe your home environment when you were growing up? What was the temperament/interaction of the household?
  - d. Did your guardians work? Inside or outside the household? What type of jobs?
  - e. What type of activities did you all do as a family unit?
2. Tell me about your siblings/close family members.

- a. Were they active organizations in the community or in their high schools?
  - b. Did they go to college?
  - c. If so, please tell me what you know about their experiences in college.
3. Tell me about your neighborhood/community.
- a. Describe the community you grew up in as a child.  
(demographics/businesses/socioeconomic status)
  - b. Were people involved in the lives of their neighbors?
  - c. Did you have a personal relationship with any one in the community?
4. Tell me about your high school friends?
- a. Did your friends have a background similar to yours? (socioeconomic, race, values)
  - b. What did they think of school?
  - c. What type of issues did you all tend to discuss the most during high school?
  - d. Did your friends enroll in college? Find employment? What became of them?
  - e. Do you still communicate with your high school friends?
  - f. What type of issues do you all discuss the most now?
5. Tell me about the perception people have of you.
- a. How do you think your family would describe your personality?
  - b. How do you think your friends would describe your personality?
  - c. How would you describe yourself to others?

*Close. {Stop Digital Recorder}*

*Thank you so much for taking time out to talk with me today. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me at this time? May I call you if I have any follow-up questions? We are set to meet (Date/Time); does this still work with your schedule? Thank you again for participating in this study and sharing your experiences.*

## Appendix C: Second Interview Protocol

**Student's Pseudonym:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**University:** \_\_\_\_\_

*The questions in this interview will focus specifically on the experience of being a Black student at UT Austin getting prepared to graduate within this semester.*

*Before we begin today's interview, I would like to follow up on some questions from our first interview (Any clarifications needed from previous interview will be asked at this time). Thank you again, and now we can begin the second part of the interview.*

1. Tell me about the decision to go to college.
  - a. Was there an expectation that you were going to college? From family? Community? Teachers?
  - b. Do you remember when you decided you were going to college? Describe that realization.
  - c. What did going to college mean to you?
  - d. What did it mean to your family?
  
2. Tell me about your involvement in organizations.
  - a. Were you involved in student organizations when you were in high school?
    - i. If not, tell me why. How did it affect your college experience? (negatively or positively)
    - ii. If yes, tell me why.
      - If you were involved, were you a leader/officer in any of them?
      - What did you learn from your experiences as a member/leader of those student organizations? How did it affect your college experience?
  - b. Were you involved in community service/organizations when you were in high school?
    - i. If not, tell me why not. How did it affect your college experience?
    - ii. If yes, tell me why.
      - If you were involved, were you a leader/officer in any of them?

- What did you learn from your experiences as a member/leader of those student organizations? How did it affect your college experience?
- c. Are/have you been involved in any student organizations in college?
  - i. If not, tell me why not.
    - How did that affect your college experience? (adapting/social/academics/major/other) Post-college life? (career/other)
    - If you could have joined one, which would it have been? Why?
  - ii. If yes, tell me why.
    - Tell me what organizations you are/were involved in at college.
      - Why did you choose them?
    - If you were involved, were you a leader/officer in any of them?
    - What did you learn from your experiences as a member/leader of those student organizations?
    - How did that affect your college experience? (campus/social/academics/other) Post-college life? (career/other)
    - Is there one that you wished you had joined? Why? One that you wished you had not joined? Why?
- d. Are/have you been involved in community service/organizations?
  - i. If not, tell me why not.
    - How did that affect your college experience? (adapting/social/academics/major/other) Post-college life? (career/other)
  - ii. If yes, tell me why.
    - What organizations were you a part of during college?
      - Why did you choose them?
    - If you were involved, were you a leader/officer in any of them?
    - What did you learn from your experiences as a member/leader of those student organizations?
    - How did that affect your college experience? (apapting/social/academics/major/other) Post-college life? (career/other)

3. Tell me about your living situation.
  - a. Where do you live? (residential hall/apartment/parents/other)
    - i. How has this affected your college life? (academic/social/other)
  - b. Do you have a short or long commute to campus? How does this affect your college life? (academic/social/other)
  
4. Tell me about campus culture.
  - a. What do you perceive to be the racial make-up of your campus?
    - i. Do you think all of the races interact with one another?
      - Describe the seating arrangements in classroom? Cafeteria? Student organizations? Other?
  - b. Tell me more about your peers.
    - i. Do you have friends from different races? Why or why not.
      - What type of activities have you participated in together?
    - ii. Do people tend to have more same-race friends? Why or why not.
    - iii. Tell me about some of the activities your peers and you do throughout the week? The weekend?
  - c. What type of traditions does your campus have? (academic/athletic/other)
    - i. Does everyone participate in them? Why? If not, why do you think?
  - d. Do you think faculty/staff/administrators care about the students?
    - i. If not, tell me why not.
    - ii. If yes, tell me why.
  - e. What do you think the overall university population values? (religion/politics/community outreach/other)
  - f. How do you think the community perceives your university? (Views based on the race/income/other of the community)
  - g. How do you think the university perceives the community?
  - h. How do you think African American alumni view your university?
  
5. Let's talk about mentors.
  - a. Did you have a mentor in high school?
    - i. If no, do you think it would have helped you prepare for college?
    - ii. If yes, how did he/she help you prepare for college?
  - b. Do you have a mentor in college?
    - i. If not, do you want one? Why?

- Have you asked anyone to be your mentor? What happened?
- Do you want a mentor that is a peer or a faculty/staff member or a community member? Why?
- Would you prefer someone of the same race? Why? Why not?
- Would you prefer someone of the same socioeconomic background? Why? Why not?
- What topics do you want to talk with your mentor about?
- How has not having one affected your college experience?
- ii. If yes, who is your mentor? (peer/faculty/staff/community member)
  - Did you choose this person?
    - If not, how were you paired? Explain.
    - ❖ Do you like this arrangement? Explain.
    - If yes, why did you choose this person? Explain.
  - Is this person of the same race? Of the same socioeconomic background?
  - What kind of topic do you all discuss? What type of activities do you engage in on campus? Off campus?
  - How has this affected your college experience?
- c. Do you serve as a mentor? (peer/relative/community member)
  - i. If not, why not.
  - ii. If yes, why?
    - Describe how this has affected your college experience.

6. Let's talk about the academics.

- a. What type of student were you in high school?
- b. What kind of grades did you receive in high school?
  - i. Did they reflect your true potential? Effort?
  - ii. Were grades important to your family?
- c. Do you think your high school adequately prepared you for college?
  - i. Tell me about the curriculum.
  - ii. Tell me about the teachers.
  - iii. Tell me about the counselors/administration.
  - iv. Tell me about the academic programs offered to help students.
- d. Did you have to take a developmental/basic course before taking your credit courses?

- i. If yes, what were they? Did they help you?
- e. Describe your classroom environment on campus.  
(people/interaction/atmosphere)
  - i. Do you feel encouraged to participate? Isolated?
  - ii. Do you look forward to going to class?
- f. Do you think the faculty provides a quality educational experience?  
If yes, why. If no, why not.
- g. Do you think the university provides all the needed materials  
(computers/other) and facilities (labs/library/other) to be a successful in  
your academics?
  - i. If yes, what do you think are the most helpful materials/facilities?
  - ii. If not, what materials/facilities are needed for you to be  
successful?
- h. Does your university offer tutorial assistance/learning labs/other for  
students having academic struggles?
  - i. Tell me what they offer. Are they effective? Explain why or why  
not.
  - ii. Do you use these resources?
    - If no, why not?
    - If yes, why?
      - How often?
      - For what classes?
      - Describe the type of students using these resources  
(race/socioeconomic/academic status)
- i. How many hours a week do you study?
  - i. Do you study alone? Study groups?
- j. What was the best class during your entire college experience? Why.
- k. What was the worst class during your entire college experience? Why.

7. Now, let's talk finances.

- a. Did you have a job when you were in high school? If no, why not? If yes,  
why?
- b. Did/do you have a job in college?
  - i. If no, why not?
    - How did this affect your college experience?  
(academically/socially/other)
  - ii. If yes, why?

- Are you working by choice?
- How many hours per week do you work?
- How does this affect your college experience?  
(academically/socially/other)
- What do you use your earned money for?

8. Do you use financial aid to pay your college costs?

- a. If no, how do you pay for college? (scholarships/parents/you/other)
  - i. Were you expected to pay for your college expenses? Parents saved for your college expenses?
  - ii. Were you worried about not being able to afford college?
    - Were you worried about not being able to afford your university?
  - iii. Did you ever use financial aid?
    - If yes, what happened? Explain.
  - iv. Do you feel pressure to be earn higher grades?
  - v. Was there ever a time when you did not have enough money for costs? Explain.
  - vi. How does this affect your college experience?
    - Do you have friends who use financial aid?
      - How does this make you feel about financial aid?
  - vii. How does this affect your postcollege life?
- b. If yes, what type of financial aid do you use? (grants/student loans/parent loans/work study/other)
  - i. Were you expected to pay for your college? (using financial aid)
  - ii. Was there any money saved for your college costs? (you/family)
  - iii. Were you worried about not being able to afford college?
    - Were you worried about not being able to afford your university?
  - iv. Even with financial aid, do you have enough money to cover your college costs? If not, explain.
  - v. Has there ever been a time when you did not have enough money to cover college costs?
    - Describe that situation. What were the effects?
  - vi. How does this affect your college experience?
  - vii. Has depending on financial aid caused you stress? Made college less stressful?



- Do you have friends who use financial aid?
      - Do they share the same mentality about financial aid as you? Explain.
  - viii. How does this affect your postcollege experience? (loan debt/other)
9. Tell me about your college choice.
- a. Why did you choose (insert name of university)?  
(Funds/legacy/location/other/all of them)
  - b. Do you feel your university has lived up to your expectation? Explain.
  - c. Do you feel 'college' has lived up to your expectation?
    - i. What happened that you expected?
    - ii. What happened that you did not expect?
  - d. Did you ever have a moment when you wanted to leave college?
    - i. What happened? Be specific.
    - ii. Who/what helped you change your mind about withdrawing?
10. Let's look at the future.
- a. What do you think your university should add academically, socially or other to help future African American students have a better college experience from registration to graduation? Be specific.
  - b. Where do you see yourself in five to ten years?
    - i. Do you think earning a college degree would have played a major role in this futuristic life?
11. Now, last question. If you could start over from day one at (insert university name), what would you do differently and/or what do you wish you had known?

*Close*

*Thank you so much for sharing your time with me today. It is greatly appreciated. Do you have any questions for me at this time? If I have any follow-up questions, may I call you? Thanks again for reliving and sharing your college experiences with me.*

## **Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Protocol**

*This focus group is the final session of the study. Thank you all for taking part in the interviews and this session. The purpose of this focus group is to give Black students at UT Austin nearing graduation the opportunity to discuss their ability to persist within a group of students who may or may not share their college experiences.*

- Introduction of participants and their universities
- Discussion Questions:
  - a. Besides the supportive factors of student organizations, mentors and financial aid, what else was a supportive factor during your experience?
  - b. Besides the barriers of financial aid, integrating on campus, and being academically underprepared, what else was a barrier during your experience?
  - c. What do you suggest that administration do to strengthen the supportive factors already established at the university and minimize the barriers that may present as obstacles to graduation for Black students?

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