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**FACTORS INFLUENCING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TO ATTEND A RURAL
COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND PERSIST TO AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE**

by

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B.S. May 1992, Longwood College
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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

MOTIVATING FACTORS INFLUENCING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TO ATTEND A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND PERSIST TO AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE

Lorraine Anita Justice
Old Dominion University, 2023
Director: Dr. Mitchell R. Williams

African American women utilize the community college environments as an avenue to attain an education and eventually pursue career and educational goals while remaining in their own communities. However, not much is known about the unique perceptions and experiences of African American women impacting their enrollment and persistence at rural community colleges. The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study was to examine the reasons African American female students choose to enroll and attend a rural community college to further their education and persist towards graduation with an Associate degree.

The data were collected using semi-structure individual interviews. Twelve African American women were study participants from one rural community college in the Southeastern United States. A literature review revealed gaps in the research where African American female students attending rural community colleges is missing from academia. Two research questions were investigated to determine the reasons this student population chose to enroll in a rural community college and the factors that lead to persistence.

Using the theoretical frameworks of the Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success. The following four themes emerged from the research: (a) Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages Marginalized Students (b) Rural Community College Culture (c) More Representation of Black females on Rural Community College Campuses and (d) Personal Resiliency is Key to Black Female College Student Success. Each theme produced

subthemes that detailed the unique lived experiences of African American/Black female students attending rural community college campuses persisting towards their Associate degree.

The findings of the present study provided data to rural community college administrators, faculty and staff members, college board members, and others who are interested in developing a model of support and enhance the rural community college experience and success for African American female students. This study provides African American female students the knowledge and means for persisting towards and Associate degree while maneuvering with academic and life challenges.

Keywords: African American females, persistence, rural community college

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This dissertation is dedicated to all of those African American/Black women past, present and future who have or are striving towards earning a degree in higher education.

I would like to thank God, my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit for the opportunity. Since beginning this journey, I have had some challenging times and loss of some of my greatest supporters. I had to lean on my faith in God. My favorite Bible verse, Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” continues to be a guiding light in my life.

I would like to thank my one and only child, my son, Kendrick Jayden Lipscomb. You are the one who motivates me to be the best in all that I do. I know you look to me as your role model, but you have provided me with so much knowledge and wisdom. Thanks for understanding when the house was not in order with articles and papers everywhere or eating out when I did not have the time to cook. Thank you for always believing in me! I love you with all my heart and thank God for you. You are a gift to me!

I would like to thank my wonderful and loving mother, Virginia Byrd Robinson who passed away during my dissertation journey. Your encouragement and support even during your last days has served as motivation! I also want to thank the following persons who transitioned during my dissertation journey: my father, James Robinson, Jr. who gave me the love of comedy; my biological father, John Robert Byrd who always believed in me and thought I was amazing; my niece, Kimberly Larvelle Claiborne (who was more like a sister), gave me the gift of persistence; my cousin, Kevin Byrd (who was like a brother) who gave me the gift of adventure and love of family; and Castella Jones who loved me like a daughter and thought I could be a college president. I would also like to thank my sister, Juanita Byrd (who passed away before I began this journey) who gave me the love of self and being grateful for your abilities.

Thanks to my loving family especially my sister, Maude B. Claiborne, who has provided hours of free childcare and being a super aunt to my son. My loving and supportive brother, Howard A. Byrd who supports me in all of my endeavors and is amazing motivator. Special thanks to all of my friends and extended family to include my church family at Union Hope Baptist Church in Center Cross, VA.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Mitchell R. Williams, Dr. Felecia Commodore, and Dr. Alan M. Schwitzer.

Dr. Williams, thank you for always supporting me and believing in me even when I did not believe in myself. You have supported me from the very beginning by giving me the encouragement to carry on, especially during the passing of my dad.

Dr. Commodore, thank your guidance especially on the principles of qualitative research. You have taught me so much regarding scholarly research and data analysis.

Dr. Schwitzer, thank you for your support during this journey. Your flexibility is priceless!

I would also like to publicly thank Dr. Lisa K. Hill for encouraging me even when I wanted to give up. Thank you for especially reading my numerous drafts, providing edits and advice. You are more than a colleague, I consider you a friend. You are so appreciated!

To the many family, friends, and work colleagues for your support, understanding, and prayers. I thank God for each of you. I have to give a special shout out to the ODU CCL Cohort 12. I am so grateful to have met some of the most intelligent and caring individuals on this journey. I have to say thank you to my colleagues at Rappahannock Community College past and present. Thank you for your support and encouragement, especially Dr. Shannon Kennedy, our college president and my awesome TRiO staff. Lastly, I would like to thank the many African American female students that have influenced my research. Your persistence and tenacity is amazing and is an inspiration. May God continue to bless you all!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges are the primary access point to higher education for African American women (Lindsey, 2020; Reyes, 2011; Wyner, 2019). According to the United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics in 2016-2017, African American women earned more Associate degrees than African American men. Sixty-six percent of Associate degrees earned by Black students were earned by Black women (Ginder et al., 2017). In 2014, fourteen percent of community college students in the United States were African American women (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). A higher percentage of African American women enroll in community colleges and successfully persist than do African American men (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). According to St. Rose and Hill (2013) “the gender gap in enrollment favors women overall, it varies by race/ethnicity. The gap is largest for African American community college students, 63 percent of whom are women” (p. 7). In 2015, sixty-seven percent of African American women who enrolled for the first time in community colleges earned an Associate degree compared to 38% of their male counterparts (NCES, 2016). Compared to other women and their male counterparts, Black women earned a higher percentage of conferred degrees than Black men (NCES, 2016).

In academia, Black women’s college experiences are missing in the scholarly research (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Most research regarding African American students focuses on the experiences of African American males at Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Wood, 2013). There is a paucity of research related to the unique experiences of Black women as community college students (Commodore et al., 2018; Glavan, 2009; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

The intent of this qualitative research study was to examine factors that influence African American female students to attend a rural community college and persist towards earning an Associate degree. This research served as a medium for the voice of African American female college students attending a rural community college. Its findings may provide information for rural community college administrators to develop effective strategies to recruit Black female students to their institutions and develop specialized programs that can be offered and geared towards improving the success of this student population. This research can initiate critical dialog with rural community college leadership regarding the correlation of student motivation to persist towards graduation and how institutions can support college students (Porter, 2022; Tinto, 2015). In spite of making strides in community colleges and utilizing these institutions to earn Associate degrees, there is nominal research in the academia regarding African American female community college students.

Description of the Problem

African American women experience many barriers and challenges while maneuvering through the higher education system (Commodore et al., 2018, Gray, 2016; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Black women experience societal inequities to include racism, sexism, stereotypes, issues with self-identity, and the imposter syndrome (Hammin, 2008; Henderson-Brown, 2022). According to Edwards (2013), some of the factors that affect Black women include poverty, inequality, and unfair treatment but even with these circumstances, African American female students persevered towards their educational aspirations. According to the United States Census Bureau (2022), African Americans make up 13% of the United States population and out of that percentage 50.8% are women. African American females in the United States are more likely than their White counterparts to have been reared in single parent (female headed) households, to

have been living below the poverty guidelines, and to be first generation college students (Elliott et al., 2015). Twenty-seven percent of Black family households are headed by African American women and twenty-four percent of these households are living in poverty (Black Demographics, 2023). Black women are looking for ways to uplift their families financially and socially by increasing their income by obtaining additional education (Conger et al., 2010), and thus change not only their lives, but also the lives of their family's future generations.

Black women belong to two marginalized groups, being a female and being African American (Fountain, 2014). Unfortunately, racism, discrimination, and sexism are a reality for many African American women in America. There is insufficient research on African American/Black women in rural community colleges. Much of the research that has been reviewed combines Black women with all African Americans or with women of different ethnicities.

Higher education and K–12 administrators, researchers, and politicians continue to question the low academic performance and the motivation among minority groups at all academic levels, especially African American students (Martin, 2012). Consideration of students' gender, backgrounds and cultures must be incorporated when developing institutional policies and programs for academic success. African American women would benefit from supportive programs that deal with their unique problems if they are to persevere and achieve their educational aspirations. Community colleges' administrations, however, can be oblivious of the needs of this group (Bates, 2012). Support is critical for collegiate experiences of minority, first generation, low-income, nontraditional, and other under-served college students (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Robinson, 2016; Tinto, 2008). Assuming that all Black women have the same beliefs or worldviews about what it means to be a Black woman is misleading (Haynes et al., 2020).

Compared to their counterparts from more affluent homes, Black women from low-income families are more likely to enter higher education academically underprepared. They are less likely to finish their degree programs because they begin higher education with less financial support than their classmates (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). The needs, struggles, and results for African American female rural community college students may be different, but unfortunately, not enough research is available to know if this is the case.

By examining the lived experiences of African American female rural community college students, educators and policy makers may be able to develop appropriate supportive programs that may provide an environment of belonging to nurture success in these women. It is critical for community college professionals to understand the correlation and importance of the African American female student's college experiences, which effectively address factors that affect college achievement, including academic performance, self-concept, self-efficacy, stressors connected to racism, commitment, or the development of racial identity (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Institutional regulations and policies must be created with Black women in mind, or with their input, if they are to address structural, political, and representational intersectionality (Haynes et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need for understanding and supporting Black female rural community college students' experiences.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study was to examine the reasons African American female students chose to enroll and attend a rural community college to further their education and persist towards graduation with an Associate degree. The findings of the current study may be of interest to rural community college leaders, administrators, faculty members, governing board members, and others who are interested in enhancing the community

college experience and success of African American female students attending rural institutions. This study may also provide African American female students at the rural community college with the knowledge and means for persisting towards a degree while dealing with academic and life challenges.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this current study:

1. What are the unique experiences of African American female students that influenced them to enroll and attend a rural community college?
2. What unique experiences contributed to African American female students to persist or not persist to the completion of an Associate degree at a rural community college?

Significance of the Study

Acknowledging the role of community colleges in rural communities is critical in assisting students to successfully navigate the academic pipeline (Hlinka et al., 2015). The findings of this study may give data to community college administrators to include presidents, vice presidents, student development professionals, faculty members, students, and politicians in the development of new and improved ways of forming academic supports, programming, course offerings, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support an important and underserved student population in rural communities. Information collected through this research may help in developing strategies to help not only Black females but other community college students. This research may also bring to light nonacademic barriers facing rural Black female community college students. This includes food insecurity, housing, transportation, finances, childcare needs, and mental health care (Waters-Bailey et al., 2019).

This study will allow the voices of a marginalized and excluded population to be heard and express what motivates them at a rural community college. Their input is important for rural community college leaders to develop policies to support student success.

Overview of Methodology

For this research study, qualitative research was used to understand, through a phenomenological lens, the factors that influence African American females to attend a rural community college. When using qualitative research, data is collected, analyzed and interpreted to understand the behaviors of studied participants (Anderson, 2010; Hays & Singh, 2012). A qualitative approach was suitable, as this research intended to hear the voices and explore the lived experiences of students who are African American students in rural communities (Means et al., 2016). The findings of the present study may add to the body of knowledge related to the academic success of African American female community college students at rural institutions. The findings may also serve as a basis to increase the breadth and depth of understanding (Hays & Singh, 2012) about what influences Black women to choose to attend a rural community college.

The participants engaged in virtual, individual semi-structured interviews in the Zoom environment using open-ended questions. The objective was to create open-ended questions in which both the verbal and visual cues were contributing to the final result of dense, rich, descriptive answers (Smyth et al., 2009). Understanding the lived experiences of Black female students will allow higher education administrators, policy makers, faculty, and students the opportunity to understand what motivates Black women to attend a community college to earn a degree (Green, 2015). This present study also provided a focus on a student population that has minimal exposure in the literature. According to Hlinka et al. (2015), having an understanding,

from a student's perspective, of the phenomenon may influence the decision-making for African American female community college students at critical points of educational transition from high school to the community college and beyond.

Research Site

The research for the present study was conducted at a two-year, rural public institution of higher education in the southeastern United States. A pseudonym, Waterway Community College (WCC) was used to protect the identity of the institution. Waterway Community College (WCC) is home to over 3,500 students from a rural 12-county region. For the 2019-2020 cohort, students at the research institution included sixty-seven percent women and thirty-three percent men. During the same time period, the racial demographics of students consisted of sixty-seven percent White, eighteen percent African American, five percent Hispanic, one percent Native American, and one percent Asian. Thirty-seven percent of students are 17 years old or younger; thirty-nine percent are between the ages of 18-24, eighteen percent are 25-44 years old, four percent 45-59 years old, and one percent are 60 years old and over.

Theoretical Framework

This study delved into the lived experiences of African American female community college students who attended a two-year, rural institution of higher education in the southeastern United States. The Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018) served as the theoretical framework for this study. "The holistic model of Black women college student success is a student-centric persistence model, meaning the focus is placed on actions the student can and/or should take to navigate her undergraduate years from entry to exit" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 84). The components of this model includes three

phases—*Prior to College, During College, and After College* for African American female college students (Commodore et al., 2018).

The first phase of the model, “*Prior to College*” looks at the “diverse experiences and characteristics is an intentionally broad demographic concept that accounts for differences and diversity among Black women” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 68). The second phase of the model looks at the Black female college student “*During College*” (Commodore et al., 2018). Beginning at this phase, “the model states that the student’s precollege experiences and characteristics exert a direct influence on three key concepts: identity development, external assets, and values and commitments” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 68). The third phase of the model is “*After College*” which “predicts that the Black woman college student will experience holistic success after college if she participates in the maturation process to its fullest” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 86).

This research study considered the experiences of Black female rural community college students in the “*During College*” phase as they persisted towards earning an Associate degree. Their substantial experiences “*During College*” included their support system on and off campus that provided them the motivation to continue their educational journey.

Over a three and a half year period, Nielsen’s study investigated why low-income women maintain their college aspirations. The women in his study had a “belief that a college degree is necessary to get a good job” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 271). This belief became their motivation to obtain the desired employment and income (Nielsen, 2015). When describing expectations of employment without a college degree, these women described lower income and substandard working environments (Nielsen, 2015).

According to Rose et al. (2013), despite the complexity of their circumstances, young women of color are very motivated to achieve in college. Unfortunately, Black women are seen as invisible in society including in educational settings. Her voice and actions are more likely to be missed or forgotten (Commodore et al., 2018; Dovidio, 2012). Further, the Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success supports Black female college students will engage in tasks leading to a positive outcome (Commodore et al., 2018).

Self-efficacy is defined as one's perception and beliefs about their ability to accomplish goals and outcomes through four major processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection (Bandura, 1994). African American female community college students use self-efficacy and a connection to others on a college campus as a motivation towards reaching academic goals. According to Baker and Robnett (2012), the retention of minority students seems to depend on their access to social support inside the collegiate setting. In Baker and Robnett's study, Black students had more campus connections and studied with other students more than other student groups. African American female community college students believe in their ability to reach their goals, which impacts how they feel, think and react in continuing in college and graduating (Thomas et al., 2009; Zajacova et al., 2005). When faced with difficulties, students must want to persevere and put forth the effort to continue their education. Motivation can be fluid, as college experiences can either enhance or detract from it resulting in how a student continues in college, as well as their willingness to expend the effort required to do so (Commodore et al., 2018; Tinto, 2015). When considering Black women in college as minoritized students, it is important to give them the chance to define success in college in ways that are personally meaningful and not defined by the dominant narrative (Commodore et al., 2018; Steele, 2017).

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations of this study include that the participants were only African American/Black women attending one rural community college in the Southeastern United States. One cannot assume that the results from this study was applicable to other community colleges or other student populations. Participants included students who are pursuing an Associate degree. The current study does not include those students pursuing a certificate, workforce credential or non-degree seeking students. An additional delimitation was excluding women of other races and ethnicities and male students. As the present study was limited to one rural multi-campus community college, the results may not be a representation of African American female students attending other rural community colleges, urban community colleges, or four-year institutions.

Assumptions

This study assumed that each participant was honest and open about the factors that influenced their enrollment and persistence in a rural community college. The participants are assumed to have a sincere interest in the research and not for selfish gain, i.e., grades. It was also assumed that the researcher did not influence the responses of the participants.

Definitions of Key Terminology

The following terms as defined below were used in the present study:

African American/Black: refers to anyone who has ancestry in any of the Black racial groups of Africa to include those of African American, Sub-Saharan African, and Afro-Caribbean heritage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), or one who self-identifies as African American. The term “Black” and African American will be used interchangeably.

Community College: The community college is a two-year institution offering Associate degrees, certificates, and adult education programs (AACC, 2015).

Motivation: Motivation is defined as how a person is inspired and stimulated to accomplish goals over a specified amount of time (Sogunro, 2015). Motivation is also determined when people believe that their efforts will equal the desired outcome or goal (Locke & Schattke, 2019).

Nontraditional students: College students who are 25 years of age or older (Kim, 2002).

Persistence: Persistence is defined as students who return to college or any institution for their second year (National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2015).

Rural community college: A community college located in a service region identified as rural. Rural community colleges are frequently the social and cultural hubs of their communities, offering citizens a unique value and opportunity by providing high-quality education and workforce training (Baldwin, Schaffer, & Schmidt, 2021).

Rurality: Communities not classified as urban areas with a population less than 50,000 people (United States Department of Agriculture, 2022).

Traditional students: College students who are 18 to 24 years old.

Summary

Today's community college students are much more racially and economically diverse due to recent efforts to promote diversity in higher education and societal demographic shifts (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Research to understand the reasons African American women choose to attend rural community colleges are scarce. The increase of Black women on rural community college campuses warrants studies that may enhance recruitment efforts and development of supportive programs for African American female students.

Research in this area is invaluable to rural community colleges. As colleges continue to support minority students to persist and graduate, there is a need to further investigate the lived experiences of African American female community college students on rural campuses. This research may provide rural community college leaders, community stakeholders, and politicians the data to understand the Black female college student experiences on rural community college campuses. Learners from different races, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds need to be supported and given the opportunity in a supportive learning environment with access to campus resources (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Researchers, teachers, and politicians are presently working to find the best way to create and implement diversity initiatives, programs, and practices in the United States' colleges and universities so that all students are supported and successful (Chen, 2017).

There is a continuing need for effective, evidence-based strategies to support Black females continued growth and success in all aspects of higher education (Bartman, 2015; Commodore et al., 2018). Black women are making compelling progress in education, engagement, health, and other areas, but there is still a long way to go to eliminate racial and ethnic inequalities (Guerra, 2013).

Chapter Conclusion

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter I introduced the significance of the current study and the rationale for examining the factors that influenced African American women to attend a rural community college to persist towards an Associate degree. Chapter II examined the existing literature on African American female community college students with a review of the literature on this student group. Chapter III detailed the research methodology including the qualitative research design, the data collection process, the data analysis, and the

various strategies were utilized to validate the research. Chapter IV presented the findings of the qualitative study and describe the emerging themes from the semi-structured interviews. This chapter outlined the results and the key findings of the present study to include participants' responses. Chapter V concluded with implications for future research as well a concise summary of the findings including the conclusions and limitations of the overall findings.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States, enrollment in higher education institutions for African-American students has steadily increased. More than two million African Americans are currently enrolled in community colleges, four-year institutions, and graduate degree programs (Ginder et al., 2017). Many Black students have chosen community colleges as their college of choice for many years (Lowry, 2016). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), “the number of degrees awarded to Black students more than doubled (a 110 percent increase, from 63,900 to 134,000) between academic years 2000–01 and 2015–16.” College access for low income, minority, and female students is at an all-time high.

This chapter covers five areas of the research literature related to the lived experiences of African American female students attending rural community colleges. The first section of the chapter provided an overview of African American female college students. The second section gave information about community colleges as an avenue for educating students. The third section of the chapter included a review of research related supporting African American women in community colleges and their persistence and graduation rates. The fourth examined African American female students’ success. Section five of the chapter reviewed the Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success as the research study’s theoretical research framework.

African American Female College Students

In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson, Oberlin College alumna, became the first African American female college graduate in the United States (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). This accomplishment not only opened a crack in the door for African American women but also for all women and African

American/Black men. However, Black men and women have experienced unequal treatment regarding access to education to include fair and equitable educational opportunities for Black students, which continues throughout the twentieth-first century. These struggles were shown in landmark court cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and the closings of schools that opposed integration, e.g., the closing of Prince Edward County public schools in Virginia (Picotte & Peebles, 1964; Virginia Museum of History and Culture, 2018).

African American women are enrolling in higher education at an increasing rate (Blalock & Sharpe, 2012; Jez, 2012; Jobe, 2013). Throughout most of the twentieth century to the present, African American women have earned more college degrees than African American males (McDaniel et al., 2011). According to Commodore et al. (2018), “Black women have been making significant gains in college enrollment. However, those gains have not come without challenges” (p. 21). Significant financial barriers that African American women encounter throughout their lives to include limited career prospects, poorer pay, and disproportionate poverty—remain unresolved (Patton et al., 2016). What motivates these women to enroll in community college? Jobe’s (2013) study “showed that participants’ key motivation for attending college was for life enhancement in general, as it related to things such as making a better life for themselves, their children, employment, their finances, and for their economic improvement overall” (p. 146). An education is an avenue to access career opportunities, upward mobility, and an all-around brighter outlook on life (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Fountain, 2014). “Education has always been touted as the path to prosperity in America” (Banks-Santilli, 2014, p. 2). This is in alignment with the Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018). Black women are motivated by intrinsic factors to pursue a college degree (Green, 2015). Green (2015) designed a phenomenological study to understand how African American,

female, first generation college students make meaning of their college experience as first-generation students at a large predominantly White university (PWI). Her findings included participants' views that acknowledged that some motivation came from their background and self-identity, specifically as an African American female. This is in alignment with the current study's theoretical framework of Conceptual Model of Black Woman college Student Success that included the Black female college's students self-identity (Commodore et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, there was insufficient research on the factors that influence African American women to apply at a rural community college and pursue towards completion of an Associate degree. Most of the existing research on the college experience of Black women are combined with all African American students (men and women) or all women. Due to the vast majority of research focusing on African American college students combining both sexes, significant insights into how African American women's experiences in higher education may be specifically racialized and gendered are scarce (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Black men are the subject of the vast majority of studies of Black community college students (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Grouping women as though the experiences of white women and women of color can be considered as one collective may be a contributing factor to the biases in the research (Dovidio, 2012). There was a gap in the literature regarding African American women who enroll in a rural community college and the reasons they persist to earning a degree. According to Strayhorn and Johnson (2014), "Black women's dominant presence at community colleges justifies scholarly attention" (p. 536).

African American Women's Challenges

African American female community college students struggle to balance work, school, and family obligations while doing well in their academics (Bates, 2012). Therefore, little is

known about Black women's college experiences and potential difficulties (Patton et al., 2016), especially in rural spaces. In her research, Bates used structured interviews to investigate the experiences of seven current or former African American female community college students who she described as “in crisis” (Bates, 2012, p. 13). While enrolled in community college, the participants experienced crises such as divorce, death of family members, domestic violence, and financial hardships. Bates’ study’s participants had powerful religious faith, the support of their family and church members (Bates, 2012). These women also believed in their own abilities to succeed, even though it was evident that they occasionally struggled to preserve their sense of confidence and worth (Bates, 2012).

Black women are impacted by being both minority and a woman (Commodore et al., 2018). According to Collins (2002), a common theme that bonds African American women, no matter the “differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, skin color, or ethnicity, is the legacy of struggle against the violence that permeates U.S. social structures” (p. 26). Other student populations such as White female college students are affected by sexism and unequal treatment, while Black males are impacted by prejudice and bigotry (Thomas et al., 2009). Despite rising enrollment and graduation rates among African American women, little research has been done on the factors that influence their decision to pursue higher education (Thomas et al., 2009) at rural community colleges.

Today, it is important to analyze the impact of race and gender on African American women’s ability to achieve in a secondary educational environment (Patton et al., 2016; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). African American women are affected by the intersectionality of racism, prejudice, socioeconomic status, and sexism (Commodore et al., 2018; Haynes et al., 2020). College campuses are more diverse, and yet prejudice and discrimination continue to impact

minorities and women in these institutions (Chen, 2017). Due to the overwhelming majority of research that focuses specifically on African American college students grouping both sexes together, significant insights into how African American women's experiences in higher education may be specifically racialized and gendered were absent (Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). This perception of Black women also included the views of their peers, faculty, and staff on campuses, as well as members of their own communities. This affects African American women's self-identity and how others view them (Becares & Priest, 2015; Commodore et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Some Black women believe they have to project a strong image because there were other Black women who faced even greater difficulties and made it through the challenges (West et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Community college professionals need to understand the significance of the diverse dynamics of identity development with African American community college female students and how this can impact the interactions within the classroom and campus community (Commodore et al., 2018; Ritchey, 2014).

Black female students often struggle to fit in their home community and on the college campus, which can be an obstacle to success (Ritchey, 2014). These students also may have to code switch to fit in two different cultures. According to McCluney et al. (2012), code switching is when an individual change one's speech, appearance, conduct, and expressions to blend in with the dominant culture. As a minority college student, their peers in their home community may accuse them of "acting white (AW)" (Durkee et al., 2019, p. 1) because of college enrollment and attendance. African-Americans and other minorities who exhibit qualities or behaviors that are thought to be typical of White culture are the most frequently targeted by cultural invalidations (Durkee et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2019). Some community members may feel

the Black woman is forgetting her roots and is losing her identity (Carbado & Gulati, 2013). According to this social understanding of identification, it is not just whether Black women appear to be members of a particular race or culture, but also whether they are perceived by peers to conduct one's self with the identified race and culture (Carbado & Gulati, 2013).

Black women may struggle with being a part of the community college campus community. It is common knowledge that settling into college life can be challenging (Baldwin et al., 2003; Commodore et al., 2018; Thelamour et al., 2019). This adjustment can be a barrier for African American females applying to college and persisting towards graduating with a degree (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). While some individuals of color might strive to keep their dual, multifaceted, and intersecting identification, others could resolve to remove parts of their culture and background (Liu et al., 2019).

African American women also deal with the "concrete ceiling" effect, which can impact their academic and career aspirations. According to Thomas et al. (2009) the "concrete ceiling" concept is different from the "glass ceiling" effect in that, unlike glass, which can be seen through and broken, concrete is more difficult to enter and cannot be pierced without applying great pressure. This "concrete ceiling" effect is the manifestation of the negative factors of racism, sexism, and classism and is a hindrance to Black women in the 21st century United States (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013). African American female students have made strides in enrolling in colleges and universities but continue to deal with these types of challenges in persisting towards earning a degree (Commodore et al., 2018). Consideration must be applied to understand that each Black female college student comes into college with different "motivations, expectations, and capabilities" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 70).

Shaw and Coleman (2000) conducted a study focused on the total lived experiences of African American female community college students and the push to reach “upward social mobility” (p. 449) through enrollment in college. This research described the journey of fifteen African American women attending community college. The researchers assessed the impact on Black female students’ relationships with family, friends, and faculty and the alignment of their success in the college environment. Although improvement was noted, working-class and minority women wanted to improve their social and financial situations by going to college, their social mobility has largely gone unnoticed (Shaw & Coleman, 2000). This research also viewed the impact that unsupportive family members had on these students reaching their educational goals. The findings of Shaw and Coleman’s study outlined the experiences African American women had with raising a family, support from kin networks to assist with family duties, and their commitment to continue with the relationships with community friends while developing new relationship within the educational institution. These study findings revolve around the ways interpersonal relationships can affect students’ attempts to succeed in college (Shaw & Coleman, 2000).

COVID-19 and African American Female Community College Students

During mid-semester of Spring 2020, colleges and universities all closed due to the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic. Institutions of higher education had to adapt quickly to teaching online and learning how to utilize online platforms in the midst of juggling numerous challenges while figuring out how to support students; train and assist faculty and staff to continue to provide education; and provide support services to include internet access, academic and socioemotional supports, etc. (Blankstein et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2020). Faculty

and staff had to be trained very quickly on how to support the students in the virtual environment (Blankstein et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected marginalized communities in numerous ways to include physical health, mental health, economics, education, childcare, elder care, and safety (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). According to the CDC, African Americans in the United States are disproportionately affected by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), dying at higher rates than white individuals (Centers for Disease Control, 2022). These are the same students in community colleges (Ebanks & Francois, 2022). This is because “the community college serves as a gateway to higher education for Black students in America” (Camardelle et al., 2022, p. 15).

The pandemic forced community colleges to support students’ academic and nonacademic needs even more than pre-pandemic. With little preparation, higher educational institutions developed COVID-19 policies and procedures by updating their websites to include information on campus and community resources to support their campus members (Blankstein, et al., 2020). Students struggled with technological issues to include access to the internet and computers (Harper, 2020; Salazar et al., 2020). Institutions developed laptop and hotspot (internet) loan programs for students (Salazar et al., 2020).

During the early phases of the pandemic, students were in survival mode and worried about how to pay rent, utilities, purchase foods, and basic necessities (Brock & Diwa, 2021). Many students of color were employed in jobs that were deemed essential and were risking their lives to work, while caring for family members to include school aged children and senior family members (Harper, 2020).

How did the pandemic affect African American female community college students in rural communities? College students in rural communities have challenges unique to their environment to include limited (or none) highspeed internet and public transportation (Ratledge et al., 2020). Since the pandemic, the enrollment of African American females' enrollment in community colleges has declined by 15 percent (Camardelle et al., 2022; NCES, 2021). "The COVID pandemic accelerated the trend of declining enrollments in community colleges and put the academic and career plans of many students on hold" (Brock & Diwa, 2021, p. 10).

According to Blankstein et al. (2020), results from the COVID-19 Student Survey and COVID-19 Faculty Survey concluded that students desired more interaction and assistance from the financial aid and academic counseling offices; increased difficulty balancing school, work, and home responsibilities; were concerned regarding physical and mental health, especially among underserved students of color; and an increase in food and housing security.

Prior to the pandemic, student parents had to balance their responsibilities as employees, parents, and students; now the roles and responsibility were heightened and expanded after the COVID-19 pandemic hit (Manze et al., 2021). As a result, student parents have faced numerous difficulties in fulfilling the demanding responsibilities and had to fill roles such as day care provider, teacher, technology expert, etc. while still working, completing college course work, and trying to survive (Manze et al., 2021).

The pandemic was a devastating and challenging time. "The virus seemingly burst out of nowhere and led to devastating loss of human life across the globe" (Brock & Diwa, 2021, p.3). The pandemic changed teaching, learning, and employment for students, faculty, and staff. The pandemic also highlighted inequalities among our most vulnerable student populations, which leaves higher education leadership to continue crucial planning and recovery tasks while

understanding the lessons learned from the pandemic (Harper, 2020). “Higher education stakeholders should also continually engage students, faculty, and staff members of color to pursue additional insights into coronavirus-related threats to racial equity” (Harper, 2020, p. 160).

African American First-Generation Female Community College Students

Many African American female students are first generation college students and from low socioeconomic families. During the 1960s, the term first-generation college student was first used to determine students’ eligibility to receive financial aid to pay for college (Everett, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education TRIO Programs (2018) defines “an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree are considered to be a first-generation student.” The Center for First Generation for Student Success (2017) considers first-generation students to suggest that a student's parents not having gone to college could mean they lack the essential cultural capital needed for success in college. Many of these students have difficulty maneuvering the complicated higher education system and may not be confident in their own abilities.

Many first-generation students are more likely than other students to attend public 2-year community colleges (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; NCES, 2019). During 2011-12, first generation students comprised 36% of dependent students enrolled at public community colleges, 24% at public four-year institutions and 19% at private nonprofit four-year schools (Ma & Baum, 2016). Community colleges have an “open door” policy to anyone who would like to seek a college education (Everett, 2015).

There continues to be a growth of first generation and low-income students who begin their educational journeys at the community college but do not earn a credential (Barnett &

Kopko, 2020). There are challenges regarding the retention and graduation rates of first-generation community college students. First generation, African American women may not feel supported in the educational environment. Many of these students are not prepared or may be nontraditional students who are not academically and emotionally ready for college level courses. According to Strayhorn (2006), first-generation college students encounter a variety of special difficulties in higher education, which may affect educational outcomes. Many African American female college students are managing their home responsibilities with their academic responsibilities, have a lack of guidance from their parents and other family members, have low self-efficacy, and additional responsibilities (Gilford & Reynolds, 2011). Many first-generation college students grow personally more than their more advantaged counterparts, despite starting out at a disadvantage (Bates, 2012).

African American Women and Social Capital

African American women bring varied experiences and social capital to the community college setting. Social capital is defined as one's "membership in social groups, social networks or institutions" (Jensen & Jetten, 2015, p. 2). According to Moschetti and Hundley (2015) social capital is critical to provide first generation college students with the support to be successful and to develop positive networks of relationships. These relationships can help students manage an unfamiliar setting by having available campus resources, providing guidance, and emotional support to those students. Female minority students appear to struggle in particular with developing relationships and having informal interactions with instructors (Bowen, 2012; Commodore et al., 2018). For Black college students to feel supported in their academics, it is important to have positive interactions with peers, faculty, and student affairs professionals on college campuses (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

Green's (2015) study noted that African American students have unequal access to social capital resources. According to Acar (2011), social capital is when students utilize campus resources from stakeholders and receive help and support, which contributes to academic success. Green (2015) interviewed 10 African American female students at a large, predominately white institution (PWI) where these students shared their motivational factors that enabled them to persist. The themes in Green's study were: "a) college preparation, b) parental influence and involvement, c) changing relationships, d) challenges, and e) important resources" (p. 156). The key findings in Green's study included students' ambition and motivation to persevere and succeed in college are fed by their faith in themselves and support from their family. Black female college students require encouragement, self-efficacy, and self-confidence in order to succeed in college. The study's participants were appreciative and thankful for the numerous individuals and resources that were available to support them during their college experience. This supports the importance of Black female students having access to campus resources. Existing research on social capital has focused largely on low-income, ethnic minority adolescents, who are struggling to find their way in the campus environment (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Community college campuses would benefit from providing support to first generation, low income and/or minority students who may need assistance in maneuvering the complicated higher education system. Additionally, compared to other types of colleges and universities, community colleges enroll a higher proportion of non-White students (Martin et al., 2014). Providing this support is not only beneficial but provides needed direction to enable the student to persist towards degree attainment and for the growth and inclusion of the college campus (Sutherland, 2011).

Community college students who are planning to transfer to a four-year institution also experience transfer student capital. Transfer student capital is defined as “how community college students accumulate knowledge in order to negotiate the transfer process, such as understanding credit transfer agreements between colleges, grade requirements for admission into a desired major, and course prerequisites” (Laanan et al., 2010 p. 180). Community colleges' transfer programs might be seen as a way access higher education opportunity and social mobility (Laanan et al., 2010). Transferring provides minority and first-generation students access to the path towards obtaining a bachelor’s degree that otherwise may have been unattainable (Laanan et al., 2010). Community college students not only transfer to four-year institutions, but these students also transfer to other community colleges, trade schools, and technical schools (Laanan et al., 2010; Mullin &Phillipe, 2013).

Laanan et al. (2010) conducted a study to explore the challenges and adjustments experienced by community college students who transferred to a large public 4-year university. Community college students and their families need to understand articulation agreements, costs of four-year colleges and universities, and the differences in the campus culture of the four-year school. Lack of academic preparation, erroneous transfer advising, ignorance of the academic standards and rigor of the four-year institutions, and inconsistent transfer and articulation rules are all considered obstacles to successful transfer (Laanan et al., 2010). The complexity of the transfer process can be extremely challenging for first generation, minority, and female students. When the four-year colleges and universities prioritize the success of transfer students, these students perform even better (Mullin & Phillipe, 2013).

Social capital also includes the importance of social and community networks to include focusing on the advantages of social networks, including knowledge, trustworthiness, and

collaboration (Acar, 2011). It is important to consider how culture impacts the educational outcome of African American female community college students. According to Taylor and Sobel (2011), educators in the classroom should incorporate culturally responsive teaching methods. This pedagogical framework observes and uses the students' diverse cultural backgrounds, histories, and experiences to educate on subject matters (Jett et al., 2016).

Incorporating this cultural knowledge supports minority students but also gives them a sense of inclusion and acceptance, which can be used as a catalyst for learning. According to a study about the correlation of persistence and sense of belonging, African American undergraduate women appreciated professors who genuinely incorporated students' backgrounds in classroom instruction (Booker, 2016). Social capital may provide access to resources and networks that contribute to academic success, is one of the major aspects that may influence the success of a diverse student population (Chen & Starobin, 2018).

Community Colleges

Community colleges play an important role in providing education to many diverse and first-generation college students. Dr. Jill Biden, the First Lady of the United States and a professor at Northern Virginia Community College is an advocate for community colleges. Biden stated that "the community college is one of America's best kept secrets" (Smith, 2020). She also observes how community colleges have improved the lives of many of her pupils in her capacity as a community college faculty member (Smith, 2020).

According to the American Association of Community College's Fast Facts (2015), there are 1,123 community colleges in the United States and out of this number 992 are public, 96 are independent, and 35 are tribal. The Department of Education lists 260 institutions as rural community colleges; however, The Rural Community College Alliance (RCCA) claims that there

are between 600 and 800 rural community colleges in the United States (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). Conflicts over what constitutes and defines rural communities can be partly to blame for this huge discrepancy (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). In the 2013-14 academic year, students earned 769,744 degrees and 486,151 certificates (AACC, 2016). Many community college students attend school on a part-time basis, are over the age of twenty-two years, and have obligations outside of school to include full time employment and family commitments.

The community college has evolved into an institution that provides a college education and fulfills the need of the community to include providing training for employees of local businesses, professional development, and personal fulfillment (Beach, 2011; Ma & Baum, 2016). Community colleges are the leader institutions in vocational preparation and workforce development (Hachey et al., 2013). These institutions offer Associate degrees, transfer degrees, employment certificates, General Education Diploma (GED) preparation courses, and workforce credentials (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; VCCS, 2022). Community colleges are also known to provide flexible practices, such as online courses and responsive programs to meet a wider range of learning needs at a reasonably low cost (Hachey et al., 2013). The community college has become a viable, affordable educational option with an open-door admission policy providing access to an education for those students who value the opportunity to further their education while working and caring for family.

The community college system has experienced the fastest rate of growth in higher education since the late 1960s (Hachey et al., 2013). In the period 2000-2010, the total enrollment in the public community colleges increased from “from 5.7 million to 7.9 million; full-time enrollment increased from 2.0 million to 3.3 million” (Ma & Baum, 2016, p. 2). During this 10-year period, total enrollment in the public two-year sector increased from 5.7

million to 7.9 million; full-time enrollment increased from 2.0 million to 3.3 million. The student body in American higher education is more diverse than ever. Community college's student populations include women, first generation students, and people of different races and ethnicities, traditional students (age 17-24), nontraditional students (25 and beyond), and other diverse populations, including international students (Beach, 2011).

The community colleges' student body consists of a substantial percentage of minority, first-generation, low-income, and adult students (Ma & Baum, 2016; Snyder, de Brey, C., & Dillow, 2018). Community colleges' enrollment in the fall 2014, consisted of 42% of all undergraduate students and 25% of all full-time undergraduate students (Ma & Baum, 2016). In 2014, the racial makeup of community college students nationwide was 23% Asian, 36% African American, 43% Hispanic, and 28% percent White (Ma & Baum, 2016). Community colleges provide smaller classes, additional supportive services, i.e., tutoring, and close proximity to students' homes (Cooper, 2010; Price & Tovar, 2014). They also serve as the gateway for many first-generation minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, allowing them to have access to an affordable education in their own communities.

Minority, first-generation, low-income, and adult student enrollment make up a substantial percentage of the community college student population (Ma & Baum, 2016; Martin et al., 2014). Students at community colleges are frequently older, have families to support, enroll part-time, and are employed while attending classes. Success in college is hampered by these issues (Ma & Baum, 2016). Black women utilize the community college environments as an avenue to attain an education and eventually pursue career and educational goals while staying in their own communities (Mason-Mathews, 2015). These institutions are attractive due

to significantly lower costs than four-year institutions, an open-door admission policy, smaller classroom settings, and flexible online and Saturday class offerings (Iloh & Toldson, 2013).

Many minorities are also identified as first-generation college students (Hutchens et al., 2011). According to the American Association of Community College (2018), thirty-six percent of community college students are first-generation students, and seventeen percent of community college students reside in a single-parent family. Unfortunately, first generation and minority students have many challenges, which include financial situations and not understanding how to maneuver the complicated higher education system (Bailey, 2017; Banks-Santilli, 2014). Banks-Santilli (2014) conducted a study that reviewed the first-year experiences of first-generation students compared to other populations' who are not first-generation students. Bank-Santilli's study revealed that institutions of higher learning need to implement financial assistance programs to support the growing population of first-generation students in colleges (Banks-Santilli, 2014).

A large percentage of African American women are first-generation college students. They may not understand how to choose a course of study or apply for financial aid and scholarships for school costs (Engle et al., 2006; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). These students also lack role models in their homes and communities to provide guidance, support, and advice regarding courses to take, how to communicate with professors and peers, and how to select high earning careers (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2015; Reyes, 2011).

In the United States, obtaining a college degree is seen as the key to reducing poverty and bridging the income gap between people of color and the white population (Bryant, 2015). There has been an increase in the number of community college applicants who are recent African American female high school graduates (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). In 2012, more than

800,000 Black women were enrolled in higher education institutions (Garibaldi, 2014). Many of these African American women are enrolling in community colleges unprepared for the rigor of college course work (Jobe, 2013). During their time in college, more than half of community college students enroll to take at least one course in developmental education (Bailey et al., 2009). Many of these students are not prepared for college level courses or are nontraditional college aged and have been out of the academic pipeline for many years. Unfortunately, there is limited research on these college students' cultural capital, which could impact their retention, persistence, and academic success (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2015).

Importance of Community Colleges

Since its inception, America has been recognized as the “land of opportunity and prosperity” (Brint & Karabel, 2016, p 471). Arnade (2015) conducted a study in which people from different communities from diverse backgrounds, genders, ages, and ethnicities were asked to explain how they define the American dream. The answers varied widely and were based on factors that influenced their answers. A woman named Marsha Brewer from Appleton, Wisconsin answered with the following response: “To get an education and then get a job” (Arnade, 2015). Many students see an education as the gateway leading to upward progress (Brint & Karabel, 2014). The community college can be used as an important element in reaching educational and career goals to achieve the “American Dream” (Brint & Karabel, 2014, p. 471). The community college is one of the catalysts for those who want to better their lives. Community colleges implement best practices for student success and goals (Ozaki, 2016). These institutions enroll the largest number of minority students including African American students (Gray, 2016; NCES, 2016; Wood, 2013). Community college’s faculty and student affairs staff use collaboration and innovative measures to provide support to students in

accomplishing their education and career goals (Ozaki & Hornak, 2014). African American women thrive in environments where they feel supported and respected (Commodore et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2011).

Two-year institutions are on the forefront of many discussions across political party lines, to include the push for free community college, students' recruitment and persistence, and graduation rates (Ma & Baum, 2016). The results of these conversations are concerning as there is a population that is often overlooked in the research - African American female college students. Data-driven decisions aimed at increasing the RPG (retention, persistence, and graduation) of African American female college students are needed (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). As Black women continue to enroll in institutions of higher education to include rural community colleges, research in this area is not only invaluable but is necessary to uplift not only the Black community but society as a whole.

Community College Students

Community colleges are accessible for many people who otherwise would not have access to enjoy the benefits of a college education. These institutions continue to be a source of educational attainment for underserved communities throughout the United States (Rose et al., 2013). According to Engstrom and Tinto (2008), many low income and minority students begin their higher educational journey less prepared than their more affluent peers and are not able to utilize academic resources and are less likely to complete a degree than other students. Many African American women who come from socially and economically underprivileged families want to continue their education and go to college, but many do so without the necessary tools, credentials, or readiness for the demands of higher education when they enter these institutions (Jobe, 2013). There is now a push for community colleges to develop pathways for student

success (Bailey, 2017). According to Jenkins (2014), colleges and universities are developing and redesigning academic programs and support services that are educational pathways that are more logically organized and academically coherent, with designed tracking, assessment, and help at each step of the student's program.

For students of color, the community colleges serve as an important route entering higher education (Lowry, 2016). Fifty percent of undergraduate students are enrolled in community colleges (Gray, 2016). Since 1985, women have made up more than half of all the community college student population and African American students continue to utilize community college for their undergraduate studies (AACC, 2018). The data and research on African American women in rural spaces are minimal compared to the increased percentage of these women who enroll in rural community colleges. This research addressed the gaps in literature regarding the reasons African American women choose community colleges for their post-secondary education. It may also assist college leaders who plan and produce programs designed to support the attraction and success of African American female students.

The agenda for community colleges for providing access has changed to a focus on providing supportive programs and pushing for an increase in retention and graduation. Community colleges have a specific duty to assure success for minority and low-income students because of the increase of diverse students attending these institutions to include the focus on equal access (Wyner, 2012). Even though these dialogues are happening, the needs of African American community college students are being overlooked by researchers and higher education administrators (Commodore et al., 2018; Johnson, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 2015).

African American Women in Community Colleges

African American women are a growing population in the community college environment. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016), in 2010, African American women accounted for sixty-eight percent of Associate degree graduates within their racial group. Other women of other races and ethnicities graduated within 58-65 percent in their racial group (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). African American women utilize community college environments to attain an education to pursue career and educational goals (Glavan, 2009).

In the Black Population:2010 states that African American female students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Rastogi et al., 2011). During the 2007-2008 academic year, ninety-one percent of African American students received some form of financial aid to pursue a college education (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Federal Pell Grants were awarded to nearly one-third of community college students in 2016. Black/African American first-generation students were more likely than their peers to utilize Pell Grants to pay for their education (Beer, n.d.). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not perform academically as well as students from higher socio-economic families, even among those with exceptional academic background (Hoxby & Turner, 2015). Students who come from low-income and underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds are not as likely as their white or wealthier friends to complete high school, enroll in college, and successfully complete a college degree (Cox, 2016). Women are more likely than men to be juggling school and children, sometimes without the assistance of a spouse or partner (Gault et al., 2014).

Growth of community college enrollment has exceeded that of four-year institutions in part due to open access and lower tuition costs. Community colleges also differ from many other

college choices as their tuition costs are much lower. Community colleges are becoming more appealing as the price of a four-year college continues to grow faster than that of community colleges (Dennin, 2017). According to the United States Census Bureau, thirty-nine percent of all students who attended a community college were African American students (2016). Fourteen percent of all Associate degrees earned in 2013 were by African American students (Musu et al., 2016). In 2013, Black students were the lowest population in the category of first time, full-time two-year community college students at public institutions for the three year graduation rate (Musu-Gillete, et al., 2016). In the total enrollment in institutions of higher education, from 1990-2005, African American female college students increased their total enrollment from 61 to 64 percent but in 2013 college enrollment decreased to 62 percent (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Twenty-three percent of first-time, full time Black community college students earned a certificate or an Associate degree compared to 36 percent of Asian students and 32 percent of white students (de Brey et al., 2019).

Community colleges serve as the gateway for many first generation, minority students, from low socioeconomic backgrounds to have access to an affordable education in their own communities. These institutions have become the place where adult learners have come to switch careers, earn credentials for an increase in income on their jobs, and/or earn their GED after years of being out of the educational pipeline (Bates, 2012). There have been many changes to the community college and higher education environments to include the incorporation of online courses and programs, adult degree programs, and for-profit community college programs (Bates, 2012).

Community college educators need to have a thorough awareness of the special strategies women have developed to succeed in college (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). African American

women's college enrollment doubled in the past thirty years (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Because of the growth of African American women's enrollment, it is imperative to educate the community college faculty and staff of the new needs of this evolving student population. To ensure the success of this underrepresented group of female college students, specific, focused interventions are required and need to be implemented (Bates, 2012).

Rural Community College

According to the United States Department of Education (2019), 260 community colleges are in rural communities. Community colleges offer educational and training possibilities that many people would not otherwise have access to because of their lower stated costs, more lenient entrance standards, and geographical accessibility to more students than most institutions in other sectors (Baum et al., 2011). According to the Rural Community College Alliance (n.d.), there are over 3.4 million students attending over 600 rural community and tribal colleges in the United States. Few studies deal with rural students' college enrollment and access and address their race, culture, or ethnicity beyond merely stating that there are differences (Means et al., 2016). Rurality probably influences goals for academic achievement (Niccolai et al., 2022). These students and institutions face unique challenges compared to their suburban and urban counterparts.

Rural communities are dealing with disappearing economic growth, insufficient or no internet access, lack of affordable housing, limited or no public transportation, and inadequate educational resources in the K-12 system (Bishaw & Posey, 2016; Scott et al., 2015; Niccolai et al., 2022, Ratledge, 2020). These communities have also been affected by limited and affordable childcare, the lack of medical and mental health care providers and the impact of the opioid crisis

(Salomon-Fernández. 2019). When discussing rural communities, one has to emphasize the positives to include a strong sense of family and community support (Goldman, 2019).

Many rural students are classified as first generation and are members of lower socioeconomic families without the support and information about access and opportunities to attend college (Scott et al., 2015). These students are more likely to attend two-year or non-selective, four-year institutions and colleges than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Bastedo & Jacquette, 2011). Unfortunately, very few studies have looked at how rural students choose their colleges and the obstacles they encounter while trying to enroll in higher education institutions (Means et al., 2016).

The United States Census Bureau reports that rural communities have lower median household incomes than urban households (Bishaw & Posey, 2016). Traditional jobs in rural communities to include farming and factory work are declining and changing because of the use of technology, lowering rural populations, and the lack of or limited internet infrastructure (Bonnie et al., 2020). Due to globalization, rural communities have difficulty striving to keep up the pace which impacts economic, job development and educational access for rural citizens (Leigh & Blakely, 2017).

Additional barriers that impact rural students include lack of employment opportunities, parental education, and lack of technological skills (Downey & Means, 2016; Korich, 2014). These students also struggle with the choice to stay in their rural communities or to relocate to metropolitan areas with more educational and employment opportunities, and an increased number and variety of social activities (Downey & Means, 2016; Korich, 2014; Means et al., 2016; Niccolai et al., 2016).

Community colleges are needed more than ever in rural communities. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2015) data points, during 2008-2012, community college graduates increased by nine percent in rural communities compared to eight percent in urban areas. The largest minority population in the rural community colleges are African American students, and they make up fourteen percent of students in the total United States' community college population (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Few academics have investigated the relationship between racial/ethnic identity, rurality, college access, selection, and ambitions (Means et al., 2016). National data highlights educational gaps based on a students' communities, rural versus urban, but does not include other marginalized social identities (Cain, 2020; Cain & Willis, 2022). In order to create more equal educational institutions and environments for minority students, it is crucial to understand how race and rurality intersect (Downey & Means, 2016) along with gender.

According to the United States Department of Agricultural (2017), "the educational attainment of racial and ethnic groups in rural America is increasing, but these groups continued to be only half as likely as Whites to have a college degree" (p. 3). Therefore, it appears to be crucial to include the intersection of race and rurality in research, particularly in higher education (Cain & Willis, 2022).

The identity of rural America is centered around rural white American culture (Cain & Willis, 2022). Eight percent of the rural American population is African American/Black residents (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023). According to Crumb and Chambers (2022), the Black population is "concentrated across the Southern Black Belt (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia) and the Mississippi Delta (Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi) areas. Six of these states contain 20% or higher Black populations"

(p. 105). African Americans may feel isolated and have experienced racism and unfair practices in their communities including employment and business opportunities, like farming (Carter & Alexander, 2020). Education is the equalizer to give African American students in rural areas career opportunities.

In rural areas, school counselors, teachers, administrators, families, and the community are very influential in constructing avenues for higher education for African American college students (Crumb & Chambers, 2022). Gafford (2020) suggests leveraging the social and cultural capital currently existent within rural communities to improve the academic performance and higher education knowledge of Black students. To support African American rural students, it is imperative to develop networking opportunities and intentional student programs focusing on college education (Crumb & Chambers, 2022).

Rural community colleges struggle when it comes to student recruitment and competitive retention rates (Tieken, 2016). This also is true when trying to recruit African American students, faculty, and staff in these institutions. The community college is the only access to higher education for traditional and nontraditional students in many rural communities (Korich, 2014). There have been different initiatives to encourage students to attend college in rural communities. One such program is the Gateway Promise. This program provides recent high school graduates who meet the program requirements from the counties of Kenosha, Racine, and Walworth in Wisconsin free attendance at Gateway College (Gateway Promise, 2018). These students must qualify to participate in the program by meeting eligibility requirements, which includes a 2.0 grade point average, and they must qualify for state and federal financial aid.

In rural areas, schools frequently serve as the hub of local activity (Bernsen et al., 2022). Many people utilize the community college to not only access an education but to use their

internet and library resources. Lack of employment and social activities for rural youth in their communities causes them to consider possibilities in suburbs and cities after high school (Wright, 2012). Supporting rural residents in community colleges can boost and promote rural economic growth and development, which is a plus for the entire rural community to include students, families, and policymakers (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). Only when combined with the resources necessary to adequately engage in human capital, healthcare, education, nutrition, and infrastructure development can targeted policies and initiatives aimed at closing the educational and access disparities in rural America be successful (Fleming et al., 2018). According to Korich (2014), the United States has a more diverse higher education system than other countries in which the consensus that all students deserve a good education, regardless of color, ability, and social background, reflects the value of an educated population. Even though many rural communities are experiencing population decreases, those who remain must have the choice to pursue higher education in their communities (Strawn, 2019; Wright, 2012).

African American Women and Retention, Persistence & Graduation

Community colleges are focused on increasing the number of Full-Time Equivalents (FTE's) and helping these students persist towards graduation. What is being done to support the persistence of African American female community college students so that their chances of graduation with a credential are optimized? The decrease of college completion rates continues to be an area of concern in the higher education community. Because of the intersectionality of their race and gender, Black women are frequently marginalized in education at all levels (Commodore et al., 2018; Williams & Dorime'-Williams, 2022). Black women graduate at lower rates than their white counterparts. "The number of white women (39%) getting an associate or bachelor's degree by the age of 29 is nearly twice as high as for Black women (21%) and Latinas

(20%)” (AAUW, 2022). When research discusses Black college students’ graduation rates, the focus centers on how women are more likely than men to get degrees (AAUW, 2022). This warranted a concern for Black women’s persistence and graduation rates. One argument to explain why graduation rates are so low is that students do not understand how a college works and thus do not utilize available campus resources designed for student success. According to Engle and Tinto (2008), there is a stigma associated with at-risk students asking for assistance that is carried over from the K-12 system. The student may feel less competent than others when receiving assistance such as tutoring designed to support their academics.

Community colleges find that a major challenge exists when developing and providing programs, services and supports that meet the needs of an extremely diverse population (Bates, 2012). Many of the community colleges’ policies and practices are outdated and do not meet the needs of today’s diverse student population (Commodore et al., 2018; Torres et al., 2009). According to Robbins et al. (2009), college success is based upon two criteria: academic performance and academic retention. Due to the increasing number of minority and first-generation students attending community colleges, the need to develop effective programs to increase student engagement and thus RPG, is paramount (CCCSE, 2013). Institutions and students have to work together to develop a thriving environment for conditions for engagement and engagement opportunities (Kuh, 2003).

Community College Retention Efforts

Student coaching is an example of a program that is being utilized in more community college’s, social integration, and academic readiness. Bettingher and Baker (2014) conducted a study over two years to determine if *InsideTrack*, a personalized student coaching program, increased persistence and graduation rates of college students who participated in the coaching

services. Bettinger and Baker's study demonstrated Inside Track's effectiveness by comparing the outcomes of students who were randomly selected to participate in coaching with the outcomes of students who did not receive the coaching. During the first year of coaching, coached students were around 5 percentage points more likely to continue their studies. This indicated an increase in retention of 9% to 12%. The study conducted by Bettinger & Baker (2014), allowed the coaches access to students' transcripts, class syllabi, and student academic performance. The coaches communicate with participants through email and telephone.

Another initiative some community colleges have implemented is the First Year Experience (FYE) programs. FYE interventions are specifically designed for the successful transition to college life for first-year college students (Robbins et al., 2009). These programs provide support to the students' academic and social life by developing relationships with faculty and student affairs staff. Practitioners providing "all-inclusive" advising, bridge programs, intensive student orientation programs, financial aid assistance, guidance for family and life issues, and assistance with understanding the educational system gave the student clearer guideline for success (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020; Strayhorn, 2015).

During the 2012-13 academic year, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) developed and implemented the Success Achievers' Initiative (success coach program) for Pell eligible and first-generation students at the community colleges (VCCS, 2018a). The goal of the coaching program was to provide services that encourage academic persistence and achievement in obtaining their academic and career goals. Some of the services include intrusive advising, tutoring, and assistance applying for financial aid.

According to Crisp and Taggart (2013), learning communities and mentoring programs, provide a positive influence for retention, course completion, and academic integration among

first generation and low-income students. The program provides students with support, encouragement and identification with others of similar backgrounds, and allows students to experience a sense of pride and achievement.

Another initiative, TRiO programs, were developed through the Higher Education Act of 1965. These programs are competitive grant programs administered by the United States Department of Education for first-generation, low-income, college students through the higher education institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These programs' administrators work closely with the college admission, counselors, and faculty and request referrals of students who are identified as needing additional support and guidance towards academic success. The students are offered intensive academic counseling and support, access to tutoring services, and information about community resources. Student Support Services is a TRiO program that could benefit the community college students. The program provided intensive and intrusive academic advising and counseling to students, tutoring services, tours to four-year colleges and universities, college success workshops, monitoring of students' grades/early alert system, and cultural enrichment activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Sense of Belonging

Institutions of higher education have committed to enrolling a more diverse student body (Banks-Santilli, 2014). Booker (2016) says that a "sense of school belonging refers to a student's experience of the full school community, which includes the classroom setting and the interactions that take place therein" (p. 218). Nonacademic experiences, to include out of the classroom experiences, affect students' academic and cognitive development (Commodore et al., 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004). It is important to provide opportunities to make students feel included in the community college environment.

African American women are accepted in institutions of higher education but may feel as if they are outsiders in these institutions, may not feel a sense of belonging to the dominant culture and feel isolated (Commodore et al., 2018; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Reyes, 2011). Howard-Hamilton's study noted that students' personal development depends on how much a community values their cultural diversity that they bring to institutional campuses. Unfortunately, relying on a single lens or viewpoint, even one that incorporates a "melting pot" understanding of diversity, cannot assist all students, specifically African American women, to feel safe about fully engaging themselves in the academic environment.

Black female college students may deal with microaggressions from teachers and peers and feeling pressure and obligation to represent their ethnicity and culture when asked to remark on particular course topics (Booker, 2016). Microaggressions occur when "dominant groups often unconsciously and unintentionally deliver these subtle slights and putdowns to marginalized groups in verbal and nonverbal ways" (Lewis & Neville, 2016, p. 290). Microaggressions are based on stereotypes such as Strong Black Woman and "Angry Black Woman" (Lewis & Neville, 2015, p. 291). The process of being ignored and marginalized at the office, in the classroom, or in other professional contexts is a common gendered racial microaggressions that African American women experience (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Some examples include racial segregation in-class study groups or lowered standards from professors for the competencies of students of color (Reyes, 2011). It is significant to engage these students of color within their first semester and to develop relationships and provide needed support in reaching academic goals (Jehangir, 2010; Parnes et al., 2020).

Due to the history of racism in the United States, some people of color may not feel wanted in certain spaces (Liu et al., 2019). This may be based on blatant racist comments by

white students like “You do not belong here.” In a study by Hotchkins and Dancy’s (2017), participants shared microaggressive statements that were made to them by white students. One participant “Cookie who recalled, ‘I remember when I attended the residential ice cream social. Jill, my white RA, said ‘You’re cool is so different than the rest of the Black girls who are unapproachable.’ What does that even mean? I stay angry!’” (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017, p. 48). A study conducted by Kanter et al. (2017), discussed that white students made the comment “A lot of minorities are too sensitive” (p. 297). The majority of the participants in the study by Kanter et al. (2017) study felt these comments were racist towards African American people.

Black college students may also deal with “feeling ‘invisible’ within the classroom setting” (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 65). Based on an institution's composition, Black women's positive identity development may be negatively influenced (Steele, 2017). Black students see a limited number of representations of African Americans in faculty and administrative positions on college campuses. The limited number of Black administrators at higher educational institutions creates a barrier (Gamble & Turner, 2015). This is in alignment with Commodore et al.’s (2018), Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success. Black female college students strive in educational settings where college faculty and administrators serve as role models and provide support (Harris & Lee, 2019). “As African American women seek role models and mentors in the college setting they must often look outside of their cultural group due to the minute number of Black female faculty and staff” (Bartman, 2015, p. 5).

Given the focus on the difficulties and challenges faced by African American men in academic and popular literature, African American women may be forgotten by administration and academics (Walpole et al., 2014). By offering educational opportunities within co-curricular and scholarly environments to fulfill the requirements of this unique student population, higher

education leaders have the chance to empower Black women in their effort to create a healthy identity (Henry, 2013).

African American female students provide support and comfort to each other where they sometimes feel out of place, as if they do not belong on college campuses and develop counter-spaces. Counter-spaces are developed on college campuses where students of color establish academic and social areas with people with similar characteristics (Grier-Reid, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000). Due to the constant onslaught of racial microaggressions they experience both inside and outside of their schools, African American students who participated in Solorzano et al.'s (2000) study created academic and social "counter-spaces" on and off their college campuses to support each other.

Today's institutions are increasingly interested in developing programs and practices that increase students' engagement in the campus culture to include the classroom and social activities (Engle & O'Brien, 2013). Political leaders and community college administrators understand the importance of expanding opportunity and developing supportive programs for at risk students (Chen, 2017; Engle et al., 2006). A sense of belonging is developed through forming supportive programs for Black female college students (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). More engaged community college students persist, graduate, and transfer to the four-year institutions. The ability and willingness to engage may depend on African American women's life experiences, the uniqueness of their stories, and the commonality existing among members of this population (Collins, 2002).

African American Female Student Success

Strong inner resources and a supportive network continue to enhance the educational experiences and successes of African American women who have succeeded in community

college (Johnson, 2001). The complexity of their circumstances and a strong will to succeed are two things that young women of color bring to college (Rose et al., 2013). The revived priority on college success is appropriate (Strayhorn, 2015) to support African American female students at rural community colleges. “Different cultural values (e.g., collectivism, racial and ethnic pride, religion and spirituality, interconnectedness of mind/body/spirit, and family and community) may promote optimal human functioning in people of color ...” (Ajibad et al., 2016, p. 245). Self-efficacy, student engagement, low cost of community college, family support, and the student’s commitment to success were the recurring themes in the research on Black female college students.

Self-Efficacy

It is crucial to emphasize self-efficacy when talking about African American female college students' academic performance and motivation (Green, 2015). Self-efficacy is characterized as one's perspective and beliefs about their capacity to achieve results through four main processes: cognitive, motivational, effective, and selection (Bandura, 1994). Majer (2009) found a relationship between self-efficacy and educational outcomes for college students. According to Zajacova et al. (2005), academic self-efficacy occurs when students are confident in their ability to complete academic tasks such as studying for exams and writing papers. In order to find factors that predict academic performance, it is crucial to look at self-efficacy (Majer, 2009). With the proper supports and encouragement, African American women have a strong determination to accomplish their educational goals (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

African American women must believe in their own ability to reach a goal and persist towards a positive outcome. “Resilience and self-efficacy” (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 50) provides the ability for African American students to persist towards their academic goals. African American

females believe in their own abilities and must have some degree of self-efficacy (Strayhorn, 2010). Opportunities that boost self-confidence and beliefs will boost drive and ultimately improve academic performance (Green, 2015). To be successful in the holistic college experience, Black female college students thrive in encouragement, which develops their self-efficacy and self-confidence (Green, 2015).

Student Engagement

Community college administrators, leaders and student affairs specialists should start by thinking about the student populations they serve and the institutional frameworks that support or impede student involvement (Nguyen, 2011). When college students are seeking and utilizing resources on campus, are the faculty and staff supportive to the student? Does the student feel comfortable discussing their frustrations with a course? Student programs need institutional investment and programs that are carefully aligned activities directed toward student success (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Miller et al., 2020). According to Bates (2012), there is an expansion of evidence on highly effective practices, which promotes success and loosen the structural barriers for the underrepresented student in higher education. Each college's campus is unique and individualized to meet the needs of their student population and must factor these characteristics when developing programs for minoritized populations.

The question of student success, to include retention and graduation rates being linked to student engagement have been intensively researched in the higher education field, by scholars such as Astin, Hu, and Kuh. Students with higher levels of participation in certain campus involvement areas have a significantly higher perceived sense of campus community (Elkins et al., 2011). Higher education administrators understanding the importance of student engagement being linked to student success is important to community college students (Hatch, 2017).

Researchers, community college leaders, faculty and students agree that an engaged student receiving academic supports, addressing multiple barriers will have more academic success (Commodore et al., 2018; Strumbos et al., 2018). How does an institution get African American female community college students to become more engaged? What do these students want? Unfortunately, in the African American culture, seeking assistance is often viewed as a sign of weakness or incompetence (Wingrad & Rust, 2009). Community college administrators and faculty need to understand that some students of color will not ask for assistance in their classroom (Banks & Dohy, 2018; Thompson & Sekaquaptewa, 2002). Instructors may need to take the initiative to reach out to the African American female student who is struggling in a course and offer assistance to the student in a supportive way to promote academic success. Yearwood and Jones (2012) suggest ways to enhance student-faculty relationships inside and outside the classroom. Faculty can serve as mentors to students, sponsor a student club or find a common denominator like sports, authors, gaming, etc. which can aid in building relationships with students (Commodore et al., 2018). Faculty members must acquire knowledge, receive training on diversity concerns, develop their empathy and interpersonal skills, and be accessible to students (Yearwood & Jones, 2012).

Retention and success of students in their studies continue to be a concerning issue across the nation, especially with the increasing college enrollment of under-represented student groups (Crosling et al., 2009). Many community college students do not have the needed knowledge of the social and cultural behaviors necessary to persist in higher education (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Most students at two-year institutions are older, employed while in college, and have multiple obligations that constrain their involvement in college activities (Martin et al., 2014; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Retention suffers when the community college student is not able to manage their

time to include nonacademic activities, i.e., full-time employment, caring for children and/or aging relatives, and social and religious activities.

Both students and higher education institutions are accountable for the caliber of instruction (Axelson & Flick, 2010). Many two-year institutions depend on part-time faculty; this hinders the opportunity to develop student-faculty relationships that is an important aspect of student engagement and persistence, due to the faculty's having lower level of engagement due to limited time to connect with the students (Nguyen, 2011).

There are several reasons African American female community college students do not become engaged in the campus culture at their institutions. They are less knowledgeable about the importance of engagement and how to become involved in campus activities (Nguyen, 2011). Many, especially those who are the first in their families to attend college also have fewer experiences with college campus activities and lack the exposure to role models who have had those opportunities (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Pike & Kuh, 2005). In some instances, these students may miss opportunities to experience campus life, form lasting relationships with peers, and benefit from guidance from faculty and staff that could impact their futures.

All college personnel have significant roles in providing opportunities for student engagement and success. Campus environments that affirm and support student involvement in educational activities and the formation of partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs inside and outside of the classroom provide the opportunity to increase student learning (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Steele, 2017). In order to boost students' comfort level when seeking academic advising or other student services, staff members can openly demonstrate their commitment to help students by fostering a good and friendly environment in the campus workspace (Nguyen, 2011).

The impact student engagement has on academic success is an area studied by many theorists. According to Moore and Woods (2017), there is a direct correlation of student engagement with student success. The participation of students may be academic, social, or extracurricular (McCormick et al., 2013). Tinto and Russo's (1994) research suggests that attaining the goals of enhanced student involvement and achievement is possible only when institutions provide an appropriate learning environment that allows students to voice their views of the world and their diverse experiences. However, previous research has not adequately addressed the issue of student involvement in a rural community college setting where there are limited resources, opportunities, and additional stressors on the African American female community college student. Astin's theory of student involvement argues that a curriculum, to achieve the effects intended, must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development (Astin, 1984). Many college students enroll in community colleges to "test the waters" (Lowry, 2014, p. 154) in the higher education setting. Most of these students, especially first-generation minority students depend on the guidance of the faculty and student affairs professionals to help them maneuver the complex educational system (Ozaki & Hornak, 2014).

Therefore, it is advantageous to study college student involvement through an intersectional student identity framework (Haley et al., 2018). Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) conducted a study that examined Black student involvement trends at a four year predominantly White campus. The study reviewed student involvement in multicultural organizations, Black student leadership opportunities, and student government. Based on the study's findings, "Black students are participating actively in both mainstream and diverse campus activities and organizations and are socially successful" (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001, p. 36). This involvement

includes this student population being engaged in leadership in local service activities in the community. The findings of Sutton and Kimbrough also revealed that higher education institutions that provide social activities and programs do not diminish a student's academic focus but provide the support to develop leadership skills to benefit career goals (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001).

Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) conducted a review of the research related to Black female community college students' satisfaction with their institution and college experience. Survey data from 315 Black female community college students who completed the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ) from across the country were reviewed to see if there is a correlation between expectations, engagement, and students' satisfaction with college. The guided questions were: "What is the relationship between Black women's background traits, expectations, engagement, academic performance, and satisfaction with the college for those attending two-year community colleges?" and "Which of these factors are the strongest predictors of Black women's satisfaction with their community college experience?" The researchers concluded that there is a relationship between the characteristics and satisfaction with community colleges, the age of the students, social engagement with faculty members, family responsibilities, and grades. The research team stressed the need for further research regarding additional factors related to academic performance of Black female community college students.

Low Cost of Community College

Community colleges have been an excellent resource for students seeking an affordable, high-quality college education for almost a century (McPhail, 2005). Affordability still affects where and if students enroll in school. Some students whose top option was a 4-year university

may be drawn to the free tuition offered at 2-year community colleges in some states, such as the Tennessee Promise program” (Juszkiewicz, 2017).

According to the College Board (2018), in 2017-18, the average annual tuition and fees at community colleges were \$3,660 compared to an average of \$10,230 at four-year institutions. Community college proponents claim that these institutions are typically more economical, offer the possibility of transfer, and allow students to acquire Associate degrees or short-term certificates that prepare them for particular jobs and careers (Iloh & Toldson, 2013).

Black women view the community college as an avenue toward an “upward social mobility for them and their children” (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014, p. 537). A college education provides students from low-socio-economic backgrounds life choices that can improve not only their lives but the outlook for future generations (Payne, 2008; Weis, 2018). According to Iloh and Toldson (2013), economic difficulties faced by Black families have increased the importance of community colleges enrollment for obtaining a postsecondary degree.

African-American Family Support

In the African-American/Black culture, kinship and family influence is an important factor when making life choices, to include choosing an institution of higher learning (Freeman, 2005; Jehangir, 2010; Usher & Kober, 2012). African American students are better equipped to handle the demands of college life when families are more involved (Sledge, 2012). During their educational experiences, parents are an important motivation for African American students to learn and excel in school (McLoyd et al., 2005). According to Sledge (2012), family support begin with the morals students are taught at home and apply to decisions they make in life, including their educational choices. It is crucial for African American students to have family

conversations on how to deal with issues like racism, discrimination, and being a minority in white American culture in order to grasp such challenges in the higher education setting. African American families include an extension of the family to include the church, neighborhood members and business owners (barbers, beauticians, teachers, and convenience store clerks), and community leaders. Education is viewed as an important element to many African Americans regardless of socioeconomic status, residency, and educational level and is a “strong pillar in the Black community” (Anderson, 2016, p. 1). Even though parents can influence the success of many college students, self-motivation must come from the student (Odanga, 2018; Sledge, 2012).

Unfortunately, there continues to be a negative stigma attending community college. Since the public 2-year sector's inception, many have portrayed it as inferior to four-year institutions (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Stacy et al.'s (2018) findings in their research that a student's institutional background may be another cause of stigma. This researcher conducted an unpublished study on the factors that motivate African American female community college students at rural community college. The data were collected using unobtrusive observation, individual interviews, and focus groups. The participants were traditional and nontraditional African American female community college students. One of the participants, “Daisy” (a pseudonym) stated “I sometimes felt bad that I had to start at a community college” (Justice, 2016). African American female students need to understand the community college is a valuable asset to earning a baccalaureate degree (Cohen, 2014).

Education has traditionally been seen as the key to achieving financial independence and upward progress (Argon & Zamani, 2015). African American female community college students and their families would benefit from being informed about the advantages of attending and

graduating from a community college. Some of the advantages of attending a community college include the lower cost of education, ability to earn more income, smaller class sizes, and additional academic supports (Belfield & Bailey, 2014; Evans et al., 2020).

Spiritual Support

Spirituality and religion are important elements of African American culture. In the political and cultural histories of African Americans, religion and spirituality play important roles (Dancy, 2010). According to English (2016), church leaders have historically been instrumental in influencing African American communities. Church leadership includes, pastors, church mothers, and deacons, which all have a powerful social and political influences on congregation and community members (English, 2016). American theological viewpoints and religious practices emerged in response to the specific and dynamic social, political, and historical contexts defining Black people's position in American society (Taylor et al., 2007). The Black church has been an influencer and proponent for education since slavery, and has become a place of refuge. Many offer educational, financial and social support such as sponsoring after-school tutoring programs, GED programs and the Boys and Girls Scouts (Salinas et al., 2018). Communities view and connect with spirituality differently based on the factors of race, culture, and environment (Salinas et al., 2018). The Black Church has been an entity of encouragement and support to those who have the need to feel encouraged and loved. Church membership is sought by those who may have a need to include money, food, transportation, spiritual support, fellowship, companionship, and emotional support (English, 2016). Many Black church congregations provide support and encouragement, in a family-like atmosphere.

One of the Black Church's "important functions may be to provide a community where Black students are valued, both for their academic success and, more broadly, as human beings

and members of society with promise, with talents to contribute, and for whom success is to be expected” (Barrett, 2010, p. 253). This encouragement plays a great impact on the lives of students who may not feel that they belong or may not have the support in their homes or school setting. The literature outlines a connection between rural, African American youths’ higher educational aspirations and attrition with connection to being active in the rural church and supported by the rural church leadership, pastor, and congregation members (Torrence, Phillips & Guidy, 2005). Black church congregations have provided finances to those attending colleges with special scholarships and fundraisers.

For many centuries, African Americans have relied on their faith to carry them through the trials and tribulations of life. The Black female college students in Gilford and Reynolds’ (2011) study conveyed that their capacity to deal with their personal challenges and their family circumstances was significantly influenced by their religious and spiritual beliefs. According to Dill (2017), urban African American youth expressed the importance of incorporating prayer in their lives along with faith in God and the ability to give back to their communities. Donahue and Caffey (2010) discovered that African American college students’ church participation was positive and influenced academic success and coping with life challenges. Religion and/or spirituality were an integral part of influencing the participants to pursue their education and career goals (Gilford & Reynolds, 2011).

Walker and Dixon’s (2002) research concluded that African American students’ spiritual belief and religious participation was higher than White students. According to Barrett (2017), there are “better academic outcomes obtained by religiously involved urban African American students than by their non-religiously involved peers” (p. 249). Black churches are influential in supporting African American students to pursue a college education and career aspirations. In a

study by Ajibade et al. (2016), significant degrees of racial/ethnic identity and religious devotion were positively correlated with African Americans' sense of purpose in life.

Student's Commitment to Success

Commitment to success is defined as setting goals and doing whatever it takes to be successful academically. These are attributes of African American female community college students. These women have the stamina and determination to press on even when adversity comes their way (Green, 2015; Watson & Hunter, 2016). Many African American female community college students, need the support and encouragement from their social networks inside and outside of the college environment (Hannon et al., 2016). It is not only necessary, but critical to the success and achievement of these women to graduate college.

Theoretical Framework

The Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018) served as the theoretical framework for this study. This research examined the lived experiences, access, and barriers of African American female rural community college students.

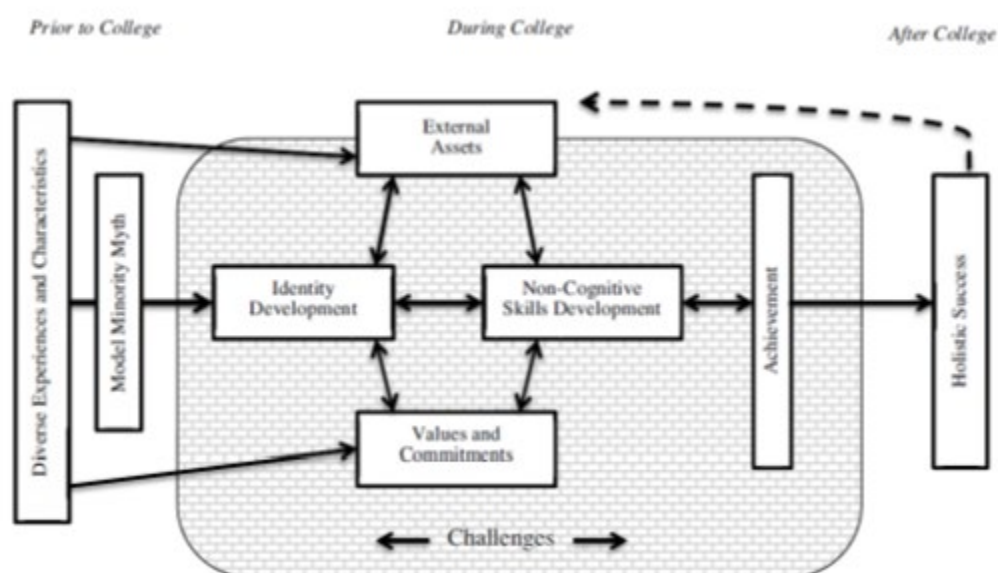
Black Women's Student Success Model

The Black Women's Student Success Model is a "holistic model of Black women college student success is a student-centric persistence model, meaning the focus is placed on actions the student can and/or should take to navigate her undergraduate years from entry to exit" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 84). In order for Black women students to succeed, they must develop and adhere to the most important attributes, features, attitudes, and procedures, which are conceptualized in this model (Commodore et al., 2018). The model illustrates strategies by which Black women enroll in college and continue on to graduate with holistic success that goes

beyond obtaining their degree, but also emphasizes how a student's behaviors and performance affect her persistence (Commodore et al., 2018).

The model includes three collegiate phases—Prior to College, During College, and After College for the African American female college students (Commodore et al., 2018). Figure 1 outlines the Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success. This researcher received permission to use the Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018).

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018)*
Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018)



The first phase of the model, Prior to College focuses on the “diverse experiences and characteristics is an intentionally broad demographic concept that accounts for differences and diversity among Black women” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 68). Black women come with unique experiences based on their lives prior to entering institutions of higher education. The

African American woman's precollege life can impact how she sees herself as a college student to include academic performance and abilities. These students have been exposed to society's stereotypes of the Black woman to include characteristics of being "Superwoman" and microaggressions (Commodore et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). These women also have to deal with the stereotype of being the "Strong Black Woman" that is conveyed within society and on college campus, that these women are able to succeed without supports and grace that is afforded to other populations (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014). It is imperative to understand how the Black female college student deals with prejudices and how she identifies positive notions of self (Winkle-Wagner, Kelly, Luedke, & Reavis, 2019).

Black women come to colleges and universities with varied backgrounds and experiences, students come to colleges with a range of goals, aspirations, and skills (Commodore et al., 2018; Means et al., 2016). Participants in Porter's (2016) study shared that their identities as Black women were influenced by family members who encouraged and instilled in them to take care of others by being the responsible, hard-working, and strong-willed individual. Educational experiences in the K-12 system are also included in their backgrounds, where they may not have been exposed to or had access to a rigorous curriculum especially in rural communities (Means et al., 2016). Rural students may have to behave and express themselves in a different manner, based on the setting, to include community versus college (Flowers, 2021).

The second phase of the model looks at the Black female college student "During College" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 68). Beginning at this phase, "the model states that the student's pre-college experiences and characteristics exert a direct influence on three key concepts: identity development, external assets, and values and commitments" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 68). In each of these three domains, when entering college, Black women begin at

different places and can alter into the positive or negative direction, not allowing for the starting point to be a predictor of the outcome of holistic college student success (Commodore et al., 2018). The student's external assets include areas of support to include inside and outside of the college community, self-identification and factoring in one's value system and responsibilities (Commodore et al., 2018; Reavis, Winkle-Wagner, Kelly, Luedke, & McCallum, 2022). "As a student makes progress toward holistic success during college, the model predicts measurable, positive change in each of these areas" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 85). During college, each person's decisions and responses will influence whether they advance, regress, or remain stationary or in balance (Commodore et al., 2018).

This research study will focus on the experiences of Black female rural community college student as they persist towards earning an Associate degree. Their substantial experiences the "During College" included their support system on and off campus that provided them the motivation to continue their educational journey.

The third phase of the model is "After College" which "predicts that the Black woman college student will experience holistic success after college if she participates in the maturation process to its fullest" (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 86). The African American female college students will be equipped for overall success and may mentor other Black female college students (Commodore et al., 2018). This model assumes that after graduation African American females will have gained long lasting connections that provide continued support and encouragement throughout their careers (Commodore et al., 2018). The model is broadly relevant to the populations of Black college women among ages, diverse identities, geographies, and different educational institutions (Commodore et al., 2018).

Chapter Summary

This literature review confirmed the need for additional research focused on African America/Black females who attend rural community colleges. Black women attend college, persist, and graduate at a higher rate than their male counterparts, however there is limited research on African American female community college students (Bates, 2012). In academia, Black women being in two marginalized groups being African American and a female, can make them invisible (Commodore, et al., 2018; Fountain, 2014; Patton et al., 2016; Porter, 2022). The need to have specific programs and experiences targeted for this population is imperative in the current higher educational environments (Bates, 2012).

In the African American community, college attendance is one of the keys to success and career opportunities. In a speech at Macomb Community College in Michigan, then President of the United States, Barack Obama stated “we also have to ensure that we're educating and preparing our people for the new jobs of the 21st century. We've got to prepare our people with the skills they need to compete in this global economy” (Brandon, 2009). These words continue to speak truth today especially to African American women who are making strides in leadership roles in the ever changing economy and global markets. Black women have the most power in changing their own accomplishments (Commodore et al, 2018; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). A community college education can make this a reality for this population.

African American women begin college with diverse experiences and supports or lack of supports. Based on the conceptual model of Black Women Student Success, the African American female college student should strive toward holistic success (Commodore et al., 2018). This can be impacted by one's precollege, during college, and after college experiences. The

Black Woman Student Success Model assumed that African American women “will emerge from college with new supports that endure beyond graduation” (Commodore et al., 2018, p.78).

African American female rural community college students have different factors that influence them to attend college. Many student affairs theories and models regarding the motivation of college students are generalized and focused on traditional-aged students attending the four-year institutions (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The utilization of one perspective cannot help all students, especially Black females attending a rural community college. The Black Woman College Student Success model is broadly relevant to the population of Black college women among ages, diverse identities, geographies, and different educational institutions (Commodore et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, there are many outside factors that influence the lives of African American women to include stereotypes and not feeling supported by others. This study will give this population an opportunity to have a voice to tell their own story of perseverance and grit (Collins, 2002; Commodore et al., 2018; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). In Gilford and Reynolds’ (2011) study, the focus was to examine the effects of parentification on Black women attending college. Study participants felt that both internal and external factors affected their decision to continue their education. They credited their mothers as being their external motivators despite the parents' unfavorable traits and failings.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Black women have earned more college degrees than Black men. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), Black women earned sixty-two percent of Associate degrees out of their race. African-American females are an understudied population in higher education research (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014), especially in rural areas. What factors influence

African American women at rural community colleges to be successful in their pursuit of a college degree? What dynamics influence African American females to complete an application to attend a rural community college? Although many scholars, college administrators, and student affairs practitioners recognize the challenges with which African American female college students contend on a day-to-day basis, there is limited research on how and why these students persist (Bates, 2012). According to Glavan (2009), knowing what these women face and what they need to succeed could well lead to a fresh, more in-depth and realistic viewpoint in creating supportive programs specifically created, for diverse student populations.

According to Commodore et al. (2018), “Black women college students are a group whose voices and experiences are often lost in the larger narrative of college students” (p. 1). This study will fill a void in the literature and provide a better understanding of the challenges and struggles experienced by African American female community college students and what motivates them to attend a rural community college to pursue their educational goals. Chapter III will outline the research design and the methodology of the current study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three described the methodology this researcher followed to complete the research study. The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study was to examine the reasons African American female students chose to enroll and attend a rural community college to further their education and persisted towards graduation with an Associate degree. The methods for this qualitative study utilized one-on-one semi-structured interviews with students. The interviews served as the primary source of data collection in order to develop themes for the research study. The qualitative research presented here is intended to enhance, support, and understand the lived experiences of African American female community college students at one rural community college and identify the factors that influenced their choice to attend a rural community college and persisted towards graduating with an Associate degree.

A customizable interview technique served as the framework for this strategy, which is generally reinforced with follow-up questions, probes, and remarks (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This chapter described the current study's qualitative research design, including methods, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, and limitations.

Research Design

This study employed phenomenology research which is a type of qualitative research (Priest, 2002; van Manen, 2017). According to Creswell (2013), "phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants" (p. 13). This research consists of obtaining data from a small number of study participants regarding how they experienced a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Priest, 2002, van Manen, 2017). This method was utilized to research the factors that influenced Black women to attend a rural community college and persist towards

reaching their educational goals and to give voice to the lived experiences of this marginalized population. The goal of phenomenology was to investigate an event of everyday experiences in order to comprehend certain lived experiences are interpreted by a group of people and how they experienced it (Hays & Singh, 2012; Priest, 2002). According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology used broad questions to obtain an understanding of the essence of the lived experience of a population.

This research method was appropriate to use with Black female rural community college students in order to gain rapport with the study participants. In this phenomenological study, the researcher examined African American women's lived experiences as college students at a rural community college with a purpose of exploring why these students persist or not persist towards an associate degree. There was a gap in the literature regarding the effects of race and rurality (Means et al., 2016) and gender on the lived experiences of Black female rural community college students. Phenomenology helped to understand the lived experiences of others and produces rich, descriptive data. It also explored the commonality between research study participants (Creswell, 2013).

The choice of a qualitative research design was based on the following five factors: goals, theoretical framework, research questions, methods, and validity (Hays & Singh, 2012). This methodology allowed the researcher to use words to voice the lived experiences of a marginalized population through data collection from interviews and unobtrusive observations through the subjective view (Adu, 2021; Hays & Singh, 2012). Through the use of semi-structured interviews, reading and analyzing the transcripts, and utilizing the theoretical framework of the Conceptual Model of Black Woman College Student Success, this researcher identified themes.

Goals

In qualitative investigation, a research goal was an extensive plan for achieving a desired result that considered what data was gathered based on the needs of all those involved in the researcher's study (Adu, 2021; Hays & Singh, 2012). The following outlined the current study's goals. One of the goals of the current research was to give a much-warranted voice to African American female community college students attending rural institutions by sharing the actual words and thoughts of the current study participants. Most social scientific research developed knowledge for the scientific community, with the ultimate goal of benefiting society (Tolley et al., 2016). This research may benefit not only the rural community college campus but also the rural community. In the research, when rurality is studied, focus is mostly on white students (Bigham, 2021; Crumb & Chambers, 2022). The African American population is "largely, 80% of rural African Americans in the U.S. live in the Black Belt, which comprises 623 counties across 11 Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia" (Bigham, 2021). It was imperative to understand the Black female educational experiences in rural communities in order to promote representation, highlight the similarities and uniqueness of learning what is important to Black women in rural regions (Nichols, 2021).

Another goal of the present study was to add to the literature regarding the unique experiences of African American/Black women who attended rural community colleges. This research familiarized the reviewer to the topic, included a described evaluation of what currently is the identified phenomenon and filled relevant gaps in the literature that the current study addressed (Tolley et al., 2016). The present study's findings can provide community college administrators the data to develop effective specialized support programs and curricula to

be offered and geared towards improving the success of African American female students attending rural community colleges (Ebanks & Francois, 2022).

Because the vast majority of studies on Black American college students group both genders together, important information about how Black American females' experiences in higher education may differ is missing (Commodore et al., 2018; Farmer, Hilton, & Reneau, 2016). The lived unique experiences of African American women who chose a rural community college and persist towards obtaining an Associate degree will be explored using qualitative, phenomenological research study. According to Englander (2012) “phenomenological research begins with acknowledging that there is a need to understand a phenomenon from the point of view of the lived experience in order to be able to discover the meaning of it” (p.16). This population needs to be studied in order to give voice and importance to a group that has been silenced and invisible in the research.

Semi-structured Interviews

In qualitative research, a popular way to gather data was the use of descriptive research by conducting semi-structured, individual interviews. Interviews have been a catalyst in developing early educational theory to understand a phenomenon (Adu, 2021; Hays & Singh, 2012). Semi-structured interviews provided the participant a voice as necessary to give a more detailed account of a phenomenon that was being studied (Hays & Singh, 2012; Seidman, 2006). Open-ended questions were used to interview the participants to enable the interviewee to outline their lived experiences within the study's topic and to share the effect the “concrete experiences” had on their lives (Seidman, 2006).

When using this methodology, it is imperative to gain rapport with the participants and allow the interview to not be extremely structured to obtain the data for the current study (Bell,

Fahmy, & Gordan, 2016; Hays & Singh, 2012). According to Seidman (2006), interviewing allows the participants to reflect on their lived experiences and reflect on the meaning of their experiences. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) “conducting effective semi structured interviews requires: (1) a relational focus, including active engagement and curiosity, and (2) practice in the skills of interviewing” (p. 1).

Research Questions

In phenomenological research, good research questions are essential in adding to the literature. “A research question is a narrow, challenging question addressing an issue, problem, or controversy that is answered with a conclusion based on the analysis and interpretation of evidence” (Lipowski, 2008, p. 1667). The research questions used in the current study were specific, complex, and relevant to the reasons African American women persist or not persist towards graduation while attending a rural community college. In all studies, researchers must decide where and how they will gather the data needed to address their research questions (Tolley, et al., 2016). The research participants answered open-ended questions during a semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher. The core of qualitative research was the participants providing answers to the questions (Tolley et al., 2016). Designing qualitative research questions required keeping them diverse enough to allow for a dynamic design that can change as data was collected and processed while still being detailed to limit the current study (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher was able to hypothesize answers to the research questions. It is critical to understand the types of answers that were possible based on the type of questions, and it can even be beneficial to make assumptions about possible outcomes (White, 2017).

Methods

Research methods served as a roadmap to the collection of data for the current study. Socially engaged researchers faced the challenge of developing with innovative ideas to improve the cultural impact of their research (Nápoles-Springer & Stewart, 2006). Regardless of the research strategy, the methods used for data organization and collecting must be transparent and repeatable, enabling data analysis. (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Validity

Validity in qualitative research is "...the truthfulness of your findings and conclusions based on maximum opportunity to hear participant voices in a particular context" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 192). Research across the scientific sciences, social sciences, and humanities must be valid (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The researcher checked the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings by keeping an audit trail including interview transcripts, video and audio recordings of the individual interviews, codebook, member checking and keeping a reflexive journal.

Reflexive Journal

The researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process. The reflexive journal became a tool to document internal processes in understanding the identified phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013). During the beginning of the researcher's study to the data analysis, the thoughts and reflections were documented by utilizing typed entries that were kept on the researcher's password protected computer. Keeping track of views about research decisions and improved dependability emphasized the process' transparency (Houghton et al., 2013). The researcher also made an entry after each interview in the reflexive journal to share key points and observations during the interview. This process allowed for the reliability, rigor, and credibility of the research findings (Houghton et al., 2013).

Member Checking

Another way to ensure validity and trustworthiness is the use of member checking. Member checking allowed the participants to review the transcript of their interview to ensure accuracy. To ensure accuracy of the current study's findings, the researcher shared the results with each participants to include the meanings of the themes (Amankwaa, 2016; Hays & Singh, 2012). The present study findings were shared with the participants by email. The researcher requested the participants respond by email regarding the accuracy of the results or any changes that needed to be made to the data. This process allowed additional opportunities for the participants' voices to be heard.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected through the use of individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were face to face using Zoom video technology and were recorded. The interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes each. Prior to the individual interview session, each study participant received The Research Study Description for Recruitment of Participants email (Appendix A), Informed Consent to Participate in the Study (Appendix D), and The Participant Interview Protocol (Appendix E). Each study participant was required to sign the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D) and completed a Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix B) which was accessed through a Google docs link. The link was in the body of the email. The participants were also informed that their answers were confidential and that only the researcher had access to the interview zoom recording and the transcripts. The email included that participation in this study was strictly voluntary, and if at any time, a participant could choose to not participate in the current study. The participants received a \$10 gift card after the second interview for participating in the current study. After the interviews were transcribed, the

researcher conducted an initial reading of all the interview transcripts and then reviewed each one a minimum of two times to seek recurring theme.

Research Site

The present study was conducted at a rural two-year public community college in the Southeastern region of the United States. The institution was considered a small size institution. The college was formed in 1970 and was a multi-site institution serving a rural community of twelve rural counties. The college community included two full-service campus locations and three smaller site locations. The student body population consisted of less than 3,500 students. Table 1 displays the ethnicity and gender composition of the participating institution. Black students constituted the largest minority and women outnumber men attending the institution.

Table 1*Student Characteristics Fall for the Participating College*

2020-21 Unduplicated Headcount	
Percentage of Undergraduates who are Female	65%
Percentage of Undergraduates who are Male	35%
Percentage Not Reported	1%
Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Asian	1%
Black or African American	15%
Hispanic or Latino	5%
White	65%
Multi	10%

(Source Fact Book from participating college data 2020-2021)

Sampling Technique

According to Ponto (2015), “using diverse recruitment strategies can help improve the size of the sample and help ensure adequate coverage of the intended population” (p. 169). The search for participants began after receiving approval from Old Dominion University’s IRB (Institutional Research Board), the community college president, and the community college’s office of institutional research. Purposeful sampling was used in selecting participants. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to choose participants based on their experiences and ability to provide the information that was relevant to the current study (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Participants were selected who could maximize what could be discovered about the unique lived experiences of Black female rural community college students. Using a diverse range of recruitment methods enhanced the sample size and ensured adequate coverage of the target participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). This included choosing individuals who have many similar traits and are a part of a subgroup that is a part of a large population (Hays & Singh, 2012). The community college's administrators were contacted, and referral requests were made to the Dean of Institutional Research, the specific academic advisors, TRiO counselors, financial aid staff, faculty, and student ambassadors were familiar with students meeting the current study's criteria.

Description of Participants

The sample for this study consisted of traditional and nontraditional African American/Black female community college students who were currently enrolled or graduated within three years of the present study with an Associate of Arts and Science transfer degree or Associates of Applied Science degree from the research institution. Students enrolled in a certificate curriculum, workforce programs or General Educational Development (GED) program did not qualify to participate in the present study. The researcher worked with the college's staff to help identify possible participants. The goal was to identify ten qualified study participants to interview.

After receiving the names of students and/or graduates from the institution, the researcher contacted those who met the criteria and made a request for their participation in the current study. The researcher sent to the potential participants the Research Study Description for Recruitment of Participants email (Appendix A) which explained the current study and the link to complete the Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix B). Once the potential participants responded to the email and completed the link to the Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix B)

and the researcher confirmed that the potential participant met the criteria, the participant was sent an email or called to confirm their participation. Once confirmation was made, the date and time was scheduled to conduct the interview on Zoom. The interview confirmation email was sent to the participants including the date and time of the interview, the Zoom link and information, and the following attachments: Consent to Participate in the Study (Appendix D) and The Interview Protocol (Appendix E). The researcher stressed to each participant that this request was made as an Old Dominion University doctoral student and their participation in the researcher's study was voluntary and would not impact their academic status.

Measures to Ensure Participant Confidentiality and Safety

To maintain confidentiality in the written report, each participant was referred by their pseudonym developed by the current study's participant which also established additional rapport with the interviewee. Participants were informed that the present study is voluntary. At any time during the various stages of the research, participants were told they could decide to not participate in the current study.

Hard copy data collected from the present study was stored in a locked file cabinet for which the researcher has the only key. Electronic data was stored on the researcher's password protected computer and, in an Old Dominion University's password, protected Zoom cloud.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the current study:

1. What are the unique experiences of African American female students that influenced them to attend a rural community college?
2. What unique experiences contributed to African American female students to persist or not persist to the completion of an Associate degree at a rural community college?

Data Collection

Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews using Zoom. Phenomenology research used interviews with participants who have experienced the phenomenon and met the criteria for sample selection. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to complete a Demographic Question (Appendix B) which was sent by email using a Google doc survey computer link. The questionnaire included the participant's pseudonym, age, race/ethnicity, and number of completed college credits. Each participant was referred to by her pseudonym in the present study.

The researcher contacted each participant by phone or email to confirm the date of their interview on Zoom. Each interview was recorded on the researcher's password protected Zoom cloud. The transcription of the interview was saved on the researcher's password protected computer. After the completion of all the participants' initial interview, a follow up interview was scheduled with the participants. During the second interview, the researcher asked follow up questions to receive additional information.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher was the instrument (Hays & Singh, 2012; Pezella et al., 2012). This means that the opinions, interview style, and observation protocol of the researcher needed to be considered during the current study (Pezella et al., 2012). This researcher used individual semi-structured interviews to obtain the data. Open-ended questions were used in order to allow the participants the opportunity to elaborate on the answers without feeling led to answer in a certain way. See Appendix E for the Participant Interview Protocol for African American Female Students Attending a Rural Community College which lists the interview questions.

Prior to the interview, each participant was required to complete the Demographic Survey (Appendix B). Once it was confirmed that the participant met the criteria, an email was sent requesting each study participant to sign and return the Consent to Participate in the Study form (see Appendix D) to the researcher. Each participant received a copy of The Interview Protocol (Appendix E). The subjects were also informed that their participation in the study was strictly voluntary and at any time they could choose not to participate in the research.

The data were collected using individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were comprised of predetermined open-ended questions which delved into the participant's opinion about an identified subject matter (Creswell, 2014; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The researcher read and reviewed each of the transcribed interviews at least two times in order to develop themes from the raw data.

Data Analysis

Careful analysis of the data helped to address the research questions regarding the factors that African American female community college students believe influenced their reasons for choosing a rural community college to pursue an Associate degree. Using the elements in the Conceptual Framework of Black Woman College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018), the researcher analyzed the data by utilizing each participant's answer to identify the most important key elements.

Prior to beginning research, it is critical to create a data analysis plan that includes storing the data in common themes and grouping like terms together (Adu, 2021; Hays & Singh, 2012). The process is referred to as coding. Methods of coding employ mechanisms that disclose themes incorporated in data, implying contextual characteristics toward organizing the data through which definition can be negotiated, compiled, and displayed (Williams & Moser, 2019).

A codebook was developed with a list of themes relevant to the research. The codebook is an index of codes, subcodes, and patterns (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; Hays & Singh, 2012). The codebook included three parts to include the code name/label, full definition of the terms and an illustration of the code (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The data was compiled in the codebook. Coding was essentially a circular process since it allowed the researcher to examine the raw data, theoretical framework and the research literature (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The researcher used “five steps to inductively create codes for a codebook: (1) reduce raw information; (2) identify subsample themes; (3) compare themes across subsamples; (4) create codes; and (5) determine reliability of codes” (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011 p. 141). Throughout the current study, the researcher consistently analyzed the data and developed open codes that represented the picture of the experiences and categories relevant to the unique lived community college experiences of African American women attending rural institutions and answered the research questions.

The coding process occurred in three levels. Level 1 coding was based on the raw data, theoretical frameworks, and literature review (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). Level 2 coding was the process where the researcher developed codes from the data obtained after reviewing the interview transcripts. Through open coding, the researcher developed new codes and combined and cluster some of the codes from the Level 1 coding (Adu, 2021; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011, Hays & Singh, 2012). The data was assigned code categories, as the researcher aggregated similar codes based on the data and the emerging themes. The theoretical framework were included during this process. During this process the theoretical frameworks “serves as the guide on which to build and support” (Grant & Osanloo, 2022, p. 13) the data analysis of the current study.

During the Level 3 coding process, the researcher combined several emerging themes that impacted the factors influencing African American female community college students' choice to attend a rural community college to persist or not persist towards an Associate degree. In this step, the categories were labeled based on common themes and those areas that were similar between the participants. Throughout the process, constant comparison occurred during the process to include the use of codes from the evolving codebook to label new data sources.

A chart using Microsoft Word, listing the key points and concepts from each of the participants' interviews. Once this was complete, similar themes were looked at and developed a table listing central themes, content, and statements from the participants' interviews. Then a list was developed with commonalities of the interviews, to include participants' statements that were not overlapping or repeated in the transcripts (Hays & Singh, 2012; Manning, 2017). This process was horizontalization (Hays & Singh, 2012). After analyzing the raw data by reviewing the answers on the transcripts, the researcher "chunk" similar codes together and developed a more concise list of codes. Categories were further analyzed to identify emerging themes based on recurring statements about how the participants experienced the phenomenon from their unique experiences.

Trustworthiness

Throughout the present study, this researcher kept a reflexive journal. The journal was in electronic form. The reflexive journal outlined how the research was affecting the investigator's and the participants point of view (Hays & Singh, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013) on the reasons for choosing a rural community college to attend and the factors that influence academic progress towards their goal. The reflexive journal was stored on the researcher's password protected computer.

Researcher as the Instrument

In qualitative studies, the researcher was considered the instrument (Hays & Singh, 2012; Smith, 2011). The quality of the data in qualitative research was determined by the data collectors' abilities, thus knowing one's strengths and limitations as the data was being gathered enabled researchers to improve both the ability of the data collectors and the usefulness of the data (McMahon & Winch, 2021).

The researcher was an African American female, first-generation college student who has been a community college administrator for over ten years. In this role, the researcher realized that there were limited research focusing on Black women who attend rural community colleges. As a rural community college administrator observations were made of African American women enrolling, persisting, and graduating from the rural community college at higher rates than their male counterparts. As these women come into the researcher's office and share their stories of perseverance, this researcher was amazed how through adversity, financial hardships, and family challenges, they persisted and graduated, and many transferred to the four-year institutions. The researcher's interest in this population heightened when a student, "Tasha," (a pseudonym) a nontraditional African American female who attended a rural community college. This student was a mother of two children under the age of 10, one of the children had special needs and struggled in school. "Tasha" received little to no support from her ex-husband or her family. She had limited finances and utilized governmental assistance programs for food and income. "Tasha" graduated with a nursing certificate and is a licensed practical nurse. She had several job offers. When the researcher asked why she did not give up? "Tasha" shared that she was successful because of all the support she received: the support from her church – where a family bought her a car to come back and forth to the community college; support from faculty –

who encouraged her and helped her with tutoring during office hours; the college work-study program where she was able to become a part-time employee; and she also was a participant in the college's Student Support Services/TRiO program. The TRiO counselor worked one on one with "Tasha," and she was able to receive financial literacy education, tutoring assistance, and several letters of recommendations for scholarships and employment.

This was one out of the many success stories of Black women being successful in a rural community college campus, but no one was hearing about their journeys. The researcher wanted to find out if similar programs and supports would help to motivate other students to persist towards graduation. The experiences of Black female college students that the researcher saw on a daily basis at a rural community college influenced the current study. The researcher has become more interested in what inspires these students to continued to keep attending classes, being involved on campus, and graduating. Reflecting on the experiences of Black female college students in the past ten years provided the enthusiasm to conduct the current study to amplify the voices and the unique experiences of Black females attending rural community college students.

Chapter Summary

The primary purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study was to understand the lived experiences of African American female community college students and identify the factors that influenced their choice of a rural community college for higher education and persistence towards earning an Associate degree. The research was based on answers from the individual semi-structured interviews of African American females enrolled in a rural community college pursuing an Associate degree. To ensure the rigor of the current study, the use of engagement, thick descriptions, and reflexivity was used in the research (Eddles-Hirsch,

2015). Rigor was accomplished by identifying the actions taken throughout the research study to provide a justification for the researcher's research methodology and interpretative evaluations (Houghton et al., 2013). The findings in the current study could possibly provide guidance to community college administrators, faculty members and staff in developing programs and supports for African American female students. “Scholars like E. L. Thomas et al., Edwards and Thompson, and Sealey-Ruiz urge higher education institutions to share in the burden of undoing institutional norms and practices that reinforce racist and sexist oppression, in favor of campus environments that embrace Afrocentric values and foster self-determination and resistance among Black women” (Haynes et al., 2020, p. 780). This research has the potential to be an avenue for African American female students attending rural community colleges to have a voice on their campuses and to add to the academic and scholarly research. The findings of the current study will be presented in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The perceptions and experiences of African American/Black female students attending a rural community college are missing in the academic research. Community colleges are becoming the primary access point to higher education for African American women (Reyes, 2011; Wyner, 2019). While navigating the higher education system, African American women face numerous obstacles and challenges (Commodore et al., 2018, Gray, 2016; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). This student population experiences societal inequities including racism, sexism, negative stereotypes, issues with self-identity, and the imposter syndrome (Hammin, 2008). Black female community college students experience personal barriers trying to juggle different roles within the college setting, home, work environment, and community.

Rural institutions and their students face unique challenges compared to their suburban and urban counterparts. In much of the research, these students' experiences are included within the content of all Black students. Unfortunately, minimal studies have addressed how race, culture, or ethnicity impact on the college choices of rural students' college enrollment and access (Means et al., 2016).

This study may serve as a medium for the voice of African American female college students attending a rural community college. Its findings may ignite crucial conversations with rural community college's leadership about the relationship between student persistence, motivation and the ways that rural community colleges can support Black female students reach their academic and career goals.

A qualitative study was carried out utilizing interviews as the main data collection method to better understand the lived experiences that influenced African American female

students to attend a rural community college and persist. The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study was to examine the reasons African American female students chose to enroll and attend a rural community college to further their education and persist towards graduation with an Associate degree.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the unique experiences of African American female students that influenced them to attend a rural community college?
2. What unique experiences contributed to African American female students to persist or not persist to the completion of an Associate degree at a rural community college?

This chapter presented the findings of the research study. This chapter also included references to appendices, explanation of the data collection methods, participant demographic table, and responses from participants' interviews. The findings were organized by research questions that were explored by the questions in the Participant Interview Protocol (Appendix D).

Setting

The research was conducted at a two-year, rural public institution of higher education in the southeastern United States. Waterway Community College (WCC), a pseudonym that provides higher educational programming to under 3,500 students from a rural 12-county region.

Purposeful sampling was used in selecting study participants. Recruitment methods included asking for names and contact information of students who met the participant's criteria from the following sources: Dean of Institutional Research, select student ambassadors, select

academic advisors, TRiO advisors, and select faculty who were familiar with the population from which the researcher wanted to sample. After receiving the names and contact information of the students and/or graduates, the researcher contacted the students by email or phone to ask if they would be interested in participating in the present study.

The interviews were conducted using Zoom technology. The first interviews occurred in January 2023 and the second interviews occurred in February 2023. The use of the Zoom platform allowed the participants to be engaged and comfortable in their chosen environment. During one of the interviews, a participant's young child was seen in the background and the participant requested to pause the interview to provide assistance to her child. Another participant had visual issues with her laptop as she had dropped the laptop and the screen was fuzzy at times. The initial interview sessions lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The second interview lasted no longer than 30 minutes.

Protecting Participants: Confidentiality and Anonymity

Each participant created their individual pseudonym and submitted the name on the Demographic Questions for Student Participants (Appendix B). The researcher informed and assured each participant that their participation in the present study was confidential. The participants were also informed that the name of the rural community college would not be used in the current study. Waterway Community College (WCC) was the pseudonym used to protect the identity of the college. The researcher was the only person with access to the interview recordings, transcription, journaling, and informed consent forms. Trustworthiness was further established by the researcher checking the accuracy and validity of the findings by keeping an audit trail including interview transcripts, video and audio recordings of the individual interviews, codebook, member checking and keeping a reflexive journal (Hays & Singh, 2012;

Priest, 2002). This researcher utilized Zoom's online transcription and read the transcripts numerous times. Corrections were made to remove misspellings and correct typographical errors. The interview videos were watched while reading the corresponding transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Participant Demographic Overview

Each of the current study participants in the research study were current students or recent individuals who graduated within three years from Waterway Community College (WCC). The researcher sent a Research Study Description for Recruitment of Participants email (Appendix A) with the Google link to the Demographic Questions for Student Participants (Appendix B) to 17 potential study participants. Thirteen students completed the Demographic Questions for Student Participants (Appendix B) and qualified to participate in the current study. One of the potential participants decided to not participate in the present study due to time constraints and family commitments. The current study had 12 participants to include 10 current students and 2 graduates. Regarding the enrollment status, 7 participants were enrolled in WCC before the pandemic and continued to attend classes; 5 participants enrolled during the pandemic. Each participant identified as being African American/Black; one participant also identified as being Black and White as she has one parent who is Black and one parent who is white. There are 8 participants under the age of 25 and 4 participants who are over the age of 25. The majority of the participants identify as first generation college students and discussed financial challenges as a hindrance in their lives; one participant stated "I probably have \$50 for myself" to last for the month after she helps her husband pay their bills. All of the participants were happy and eager to participate in the current study. Jane stated that she "had not heard of any studies being done about Black women in rural areas."

Over half the participants were enrolled or applied to the WCC's nursing program. The remainder of the participants were striving towards earning an Associate degree. Two participants graduated from WCC. One received her Associates Degree in Nursing and is currently working in the nursing field. The other graduate earned her Associates Degree in Arts and Sciences Transfer Degree, is enrolled in a four year university and is working in the business field. Participant demographics data were presented in Table 2, including their pseudonym, age, and number of credits earned.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

PSEUDONYM	AGE	MAJOR	COLLEGE CREDITS
Alana	Under 25	Arts & Sciences	Unknown
Ann	Over 25	Education	13-24
Bre	Under 25	STEM	13-24
Chanel	Over 25	Nursing	More than 48
Eve	Under 25	Arts & Sciences	More than 48
Gianna	Under 25	Arts & Sciences	More than 48
Jane	Under 25	Business	More than 48 (graduate)
Jolly	Under 25	Nursing	More than 48 (graduate)
Kassandra	Over 25	Nursing	More than 48
Miranda	Under 25	Nursing	More than 48
Sasha	Over 25	Social Work	More than 48
Susie	Under 25	Nursing	More than 48

Participant Profiles

The data from the interviews and the Demographic Questionnaire were used to create participant profiles. Each participant developed their own pseudonym to protect their identity.

Alana: Alana was under 25 and has been a student since 2019. She was a student prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued enrollment during the pandemic. She works as a college work study and student ambassador. Alana resides with her mother and a sibling in the neighboring town near the WCC's northern campus. Alana was proud of her community. She utilized the local public transportation to WCC.

Ann: Ann was over the age of 25, married to her husband and proud mother of 4 children. She currently works full time as a paraprofessional at one of the local high schools where she works with special education and regular education high school students. Ann was very enthusiastic about teaching. She was inspired by her children and high schools' students to enroll at Waterway Community College's south campus. She enrolled at WCC during the pandemic and is continuing to take courses. Because she works full time, she takes all online courses and reports "loving the online tutoring" provided by WCC. Anne was motivated by her Christian faith and her children to pursue her goal of becoming a teacher.

Bre: Bre was under 25 years old. She was born in an urban area in New York. She moved to WCC's service region when she was six years old and attended the local public school system. She enrolled in WCC during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although she moved to the rural community, she and her family often spend time visiting the city. She referred to her family as the "working class" and even though they

are supportive, she states they can only be “so supportive” because they have not attended college and therefore cannot relate to her experiences. Bre makes the assessment that the people in her rural community and at WCC’s northern college campus are very segregated when it comes to friendships and associations. She stated that “Black people have Black people friends, white people have white people friends, Hispanic people have Hispanic people friends.” She enjoys different cultures and misses the more metropolitan areas. During the second interview, Bre reported that she will be leaving WCC to pursue other educational opportunities at another institution of higher education located in an urban area in Pennsylvania. She reported that this college provided “more hands-on and in-person classes,” student housing and allow her more independence regarding social activities and work opportunities. Bre was really excited about the transition.

Chanel: Chanel is over 25 years old and resides in the neighboring town near WCC’s north campus. She is a single mother of two teenage children. After high school, she went into the military but really desired to attend a four-year HBCU. Her senior year of high school, Chanel applied to a four-year HBCU and was accepted but did not find out until she was at basic training. Chanel worked full time in healthcare as a licensed certified nursing assistant. She enrolled in WCC prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to take classes on a part-time basis. She applied to the WCC’s nursing program but was not accepted as a student in the program. Chanel experienced some family challenges throughout this past year with her older son. She leaned on her faith to balance school, work, and family life. She stated that she only needs two more classes to complete her Associate degree and is looking forward to graduating in May of 2023.

Eve: Eve was under the age of 25. She enrolled in WCC's south campus prior to the COVID 19 pandemic and is continuing taking courses. She has had some major health challenges to include having major hip replacement surgery and recovery immediately after high school. Her medical challenges were the reason she decided to attend WCC. She was accepted into several four year institutions but due to her health challenges had to enroll at WCC. Initially she "felt like a failure to start at the community college" but with encouragement and support from her mother and the SSS/TRiO counselor, Eve was now extremely thankful for the community college experience. She stated that her rural high school did not prepare her for life at the four year institutions and advises other high school students to start at the community college for the "first step" before attending the four year college or university.

Giana: Giana was under the age of 25 and lives in the same town where WCC north campus is located. She also graduated from the local high school and works in the community. She enrolled in WCC during the COVID-19 pandemic. She decided to attend WCC because she did not know what she wanted to major in and felt that the rural community college was a good place to start to discover her strengths. Giana reported being on track to graduate and was excited about her graduation in May 2023 and plans to transfer to the four year university and major in criminal justice. She was notably very excited and had a big smile on her face when she talked about graduation and transferring to the four year university with the career goal to work in forensic sciences for the federal government.

Jane: Jane was over the age of 25 and grew up with her single mother and her sisters. She shared how her family struggled financially with just one income. Jane stated that if

it were not for the Student Support Services/TRiO program and the continuous support provided she would not have gotten through graduating with her Associate degree. Jane enrolled in WCC prior to the pandemic but graduated during the beginning of the pandemic. Jane was thrilled to say that she does not have student loan debt as she continues her educational goal of earning a Bachelor's at the four year university still without debt.

Jolly: Jolly was under the age of 25. She was a nursing graduate from Waterway Community College south campus. She enrolled in WCC prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and graduated during the beginning of the pandemic. She is currently working in the nursing field. She lived with her parents in the service region of WCC. When she graduated from high school, Jolly was not planning to attend WCC. When in high school she received several acceptance letters from four year colleges and universities to include, her first choice four year university. After graduating from high school, her parents informed Jolly that they were not able to pay the tuition and cost of the four year college. Jolly's parents told her, she would be responsible for taking out student loans as she was not receiving any financial assistance from the four year schools. Jolly realized that the affordable choice for her was WCC, and she could earn an Associate degree in nursing. Jolly was happy and proud to announce that she graduated with a college degree and is "debt-free" with no student loans.

Kassandra: Kassandra is over the age of 25. She enrolled in at WCC during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was a nursing student at Waterway Community College south campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is a mother of two younger children under the age of 8 and resides with her fiancé. She grew up in the county where WCC south

campus is located and continues to reside in the area. She described her community as a “farmland” and few Black people reside there. She is a first generation college student. Her parents were young when she was born, her mother a teenager and her father was in his twenties. Finances have been and continue to be a struggle for her. As her parents told her when she was in high school, they did not have money for college. She was very thankful that her fiancé “pays all the bills” and her mother help to provide childcare and transportation to school for her children on the days Kassandra has early mornings clinicals for nursing class. She was a concurrent nursing student at WCC and a four-year university where she will earn her Associate degree and Bachelor’s degree in nursing at the same time.

Miranda: Miranda was under the age of 25 years old. Her early years were spent in a metropolitan area about 60 miles outside of WCC service region prior to her family moving to the rural community where WCC north campus is located. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she graduated from the local rural high school and came to WCC. Her older sister attended WCC and was able to provide support, guidance, and encouragement. Miranda also received guidance and assistance to apply to WCC from her high school guidance counselor. Miranda has goals of being a nurse and was taking classes towards the pre-nursing program. She applied to WCC’s nursing program, but unfortunately, did not get accepted into the program. She missed the score for acceptance into the nursing program by 5 points. Miranda did not let that discourage her and was continuing her education towards earning an Associate degree at Waterway Community College.

Sasha: Sasha was over the age of 25 and was a single mother to a child under the age of 5 years old. She resides in WCC’s south campus service region. Sasha enrolled in WCC

prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and has continuously enrolled in courses. She reports coming to college since she was not able to work due to caring for her daughter who was having health issues. Sasha decided to enroll in WCC south campus. She currently works full time and takes online courses at WCC. Her child attends daycare, which is sometimes a challenge if her child becomes ill and cannot attend the day care center.

Susie: Susie was under 25 years old. She was originally from the town where WCC north campus is located and graduated from the local rural high school. Susie was enrolled as a dual enrollment student at WCC. She initially was enrolled at a four year university in an urban area to pursue nursing but was placed on the waiting list to be a student in the school's nursing program. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Susie applied to Waterway Community College and two other urban community colleges. She was accepted first at WCC's nursing program. She now resides in a metropolitan area south of the WCC south campus and drives approximately 1.5 hours or more to WCC south campus. She is often late and sometimes misses quizzes and other assignments.

Data Collection Process

This researcher applied to the Human Subjects Review Committee at Old Dominion University (Appendix F). The researcher then submitted a request to conduct research at Waterway Community College to the Dean of Institutional Research after receiving approval from ODU's Human Subject Review Committee. After receiving approval from WCC to conduct the research, the researcher began obtaining referrals of students who may met the criteria to participate in the present study from the Dean of Institutional Research, select student ambassadors, selected academic advisors, TRiO advisors, and selected faculty who are familiar with the student population. Students who were referred, the researcher sent them the Research

Study Description for Recruitment of Participants Email (Appendix A) which included the Google docs link to the Demographic Questions for Student Participants (Appendix B). Once the student completed the Demographic Questions for Student Participants (Appendix B), the researcher contacted the qualified student to schedule an interview date and time. The researcher then sent a confirmation email which included the interview date and time with the Zoom link and information. The following documents were attached to the confirmation email: Research Description (Appendix C), Informed Consent to Participate in the Study (Appendix D), and The Participant Interview Protocol (Appendix E).

The researcher began each interview by reading to the interviewee, the Participant Interview Protocol for African American Female Students Attending a Rural Community College (Appendix E). Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher confirmed that the participant had signed and returned the Consent to Participate in the Study form (Appendix D). If they had not, the researcher read the consent form prior to asking the interview questions and the participant signed and returned the form by email prior to the researcher asking the interview questions.

The first interview sessions lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The first interview protocol included a semi-structured individual interview with open-ended questions that were guided by the research questions, theoretical framework, and literature review (DeCuire-Gunby ., 2021). After all participants completed the first interviews, the researcher contacted each participant by phone or email to schedule their second interview. Once the second interview was scheduled, the participant received a confirmation email that included the date and the time of the second interview and Zoom link and information.

The second interviews included follow up questions about the answers from the participant's first interview in order to verify the answers and receive additional data. To ensure trustworthiness and validity, the researcher incorporated member checking where the participants reviewed the raw data from their interview transcripts. One part of member checking includes allowing the participants to review the transcript of their interviews to ensure accuracy (Shenton, 2004; Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher sent an email to each participant and requested them review the raw data from their interview transcriptions. Each participant was asked to respond by email regarding the accuracy of the results or any changes that need to be made to the data within five days of the email. Three participants responded to the emailed transcriptions. One stated the transcript was correct. Two others made minor changes to include spelling and incorrect names of the individual talking. The others did not respond.

During each interview, the researcher wrote extensive notes capturing key points. Each interview was recorded and transcribed by Zoom. Each interview transcript was downloaded from Zoom transcription and kept on the researcher's password protected ODU Zoom cloud account and the researcher's password protected personal computer. The downloaded transcripts were reviewed by the research. Changes were made to include making corrections to typographical errors, corrected transcription errors and clarified words and phrases.

During some of the interviews, the transcription service sometimes had the incorrect persons attributed to a statement or some words and phrases were missing. The researcher also read transcripts while watching the Zoom videos of the corresponding interview while making notes of observations of verbal and nonverbal cues, and participants' expressions. After the second interview, arrangements were scheduled to give each participant a \$10 gift card as a thank you to them for taking the time to participate in the current study.

Coding and Analysis

Using the theoretical framework of The Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018), the researcher identified emerging themes through multiple readings of the data collected from each interview session, watching the recorded Zoom interviews, and reading the reflectivity journal. This was referred to as thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). After reviewing the data set by looking for common themes and patterns, the researcher developed open codes (Adu, 2021; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The researcher went through the transcripts and placed codes of key phrases by using the edit feature in Microsoft Word. The researcher highlighted words and phrases that were chosen to represent the research questions. Question One was highlighted in yellow and Question Two was highlighted in green. Using Microsoft Word, the researcher developed a chart with code labels and subcategories. The chart included code labels, sub code categories, and the “actual spoken words of the participants” (Manning, 2017, p.1).

The commonalities of the data began to emerge, as the researcher was analyzing interview transcripts, the reflective journal and reading the research questions, the researcher wanted to make sure the voices of the participants’ lived experience was heard in the data analysis. This also allows the researcher to maintain the integrity and understanding of the voices of the current study participants. The researcher combined similar codes and themes while examining the codes in relationship to the research questions and theoretical framework. The researcher identified common themes that addressed the research questions.

Findings

The researcher explored two research questions focused on the lived experiences of African American/Black female students attending a rural community college to persist towards

an Associate degree. The research questions used in the current study were specific and relevant to the reasons African American women persist or do not persist towards graduation while attending a rural community college. The first research question asked participants about their unique experiences that influenced them to enroll in a rural community college. The second research question explored reasons African American female students persisted or did not persist at the rural community college. The following will describe the two research questions and their relationship to the findings in this research study.

Research Question One - What Are the Unique Experiences of African American Female Students that Influenced Them to Enroll and Attend a Rural Community College?

This question referred to the unique lived experiences of African American/Black female students at one community college in the southeastern United States that influenced them to enroll at a rural community college. The importance of this research question provides a platform for the unique lives of an important growing demographic of community college student population. During the data analysis the following themes emerged *Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages Marginalized Students and Rural Community College's Culture is Important.*

Theme: Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages Marginalized Students.

Participants appreciated the rural community college that provided a great deal of support to include the assistance with the process to complete college applications, enrolling in online and in person courses, assistance in accessing online and in person tutoring, help from the library regarding learning resources, assistance with technology from the college's information technology department, applying for financial aid, one on one help from the TRiO advisors, and the support of the college advisors, faculty, and administrators. Most of the participants shared

how attending the rural community college was important because it provided the right guidance and support throughout their educational journeys. Alana shared “my experiences have been very positive.” and Susie stated “it's [WCC's] been great to me!”

Several participants shared they were fortunate to have the Student Support Services/TRiO Program advisors/staff to help them to navigate the rural community college. This program provided information in choosing the correct courses for their major; to help connect them to financial aid and scholarships, transfer assistance, referring to campus and community resources as this is influential to student success.

One participant shared how important the Student Support Services Summer Bridge Program was in helping her become familiar and comfortable in the rural community college. The SSS Summer Bridge program prepares the student for their first semester at the rural community college and provided students with the knowledge about campus resources and familiarity of college life. Another participant, Jane stated she “...may not have even made it, or graduated college, or even gone as far” without the support of the Student Support Services program. She stated that the SSS program “gave me all the tools I needed, because I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know how to do like scholarships or grants.”

Kassandra sought help to pay for college. She stated, “the advisor actually sat with me and went through different scholarships” and helped her to complete the scholarship applications. Kassandra was proud to share that she was awarded a “Black Excellence Scholarship for African American students who had a GPA over a 3.0 and was recommended by a teacher.” She also stated that “something special for me” was being recommended by her professor for the scholarship.

Importance of Relationship Building. Several participants stated how the rural community college staff and faculty were genuinely concerned with their wellbeing and wanted to help them. Several participants stated the importance of building relationships with the professors and staff in order to get the help when needed in classes. The importance of relationships for the academic success of African American women have been supported in the research. Another participant, Ann talked about how she has developed relationships with her professors and when she needs a resource, they were willing to help her to be successful in her class. Ann stated, “I was able to get a lot of support from my professors.” Bre stated” I have a math teacher who went out of her way to check on me when I did not seem ok.” Susie shared that she is always happy, and if she is not smiling, Dr. Beck (pseudonym) will ask her if she is “ok” and give her encouraging words. Dr. Beck also makes herself available and give the student the opportunity to vent and share academic, personal, and financial challenges. The majority of the participants confirmed that the rural community college professors made every effort to get to know their African American female students.

The breakdown of institutional barriers was a reason these Black females selected the rural community college over a larger institution. The support provided to African American female students at the rural community college helped them to know where to start and who could provide the assistance in helping them to reach their academic goals and to be a college student.

Theme: The Rural Community College’s Culture is Important. The majority of participants were pleased with the ease and access of the rural community college. Several participants shared the easy access of being able to communicate with professors and college advisors. One participant stated that when she was a student at the four year university, it would

take at least two weeks to schedule an appointment with a professor. Since being a student at the rural community college, she was able to schedule appointments and contact professors immediately if needed. During the interview, this participant stated as she pulled out her cellphone, “I can text my professor right now and she will respond to me.” One participant stated how the staff and administration were genuinely concerned with the wellbeing of the students and “not just taking their money.” Cassandra was impressed with how “the professors, the Dean of Students, the advisors” greeted students and “try to get to know everyone.” Cassandra stated that she “feel[s] like at bigger universities. You don't really get that.”

Several participants shared having to deal with food insecurity and having access to food and grocery cards that are in WCC’s food pantry. The participants also shared how the professors and staff encouraged them to get the free food, gas cards, and grocery cards that were available for students at the rural community college.

Alana shared how she and her family were facing homelessness because of being behind in rent due to financial hardships and how WCC provided assistance through an emergency funds that gave her a check for “\$1,000” for rental assistance. She shared how the emergency assistance application was on WCC’s website, and assistance was provided in completing the application from the SSS/TRiO staff. Alana felt comfortable to ask for assistance. She expressed that the rental assistance from WCC, “saved me because I wouldn’t have nowhere to live if I did not have that money that came from the school.” Alana also shared that if she became homeless, she would not be able to attend the rural community college.

Rural Community Colleges Challenges. The rural community colleges have some challenges. For example, students stated that their rural community college do not offer in-person or online classes about African American (AA) culture i.e. African American History and

African American Literature courses. These classes were available through the online environment from other institutions that are a part of the rural community college system and students are able to enroll in them. The participants also desired additional times for courses to include more in-person, evening, and weekend classes. Bre reported that she will be withdrawing from WCC because of the limited course options to include limited hands-on classes and different majors, i.e. veterinary medicine. She has enrolled and been accepted to a veterinarian technician program at an urban college.

The participants shared that students at that institution have access to free local public transportation where students can ride to and from the campus for free. The negative was that the transportation provider was only available at set times and is not convenient to their school schedules. Some of the participants do not have vehicles, driver's license, or the funds to take driving courses. This mode of transportation is available but does not allow the African American female who does not have access to a driver's license or a car to take evening courses.

Research Question Two - What unique experiences contributed to African American female students to persist or not persist to the completion of an Associate degree at a rural community college?

Research Question Two focused on the unique experiences experienced impacting African American/Black females to persist or not persist in the rural community college. During the data analysis, the following themes emerged *We Need More Presentation of Black Females on the Rural Community College Campus and Personal Resiliency is Key to Black Female Student Success.*

Theme: We Need More Representation of Black females on the Rural Community College Campus. African American females attending rural community colleges were desiring

environments where there are more faculty and staff who look like them, additional student activities that pertain to their culture, support groups for African American female college students attending a rural community college where they do not have to feel the pressure of the doing everything without help or assistance. Subthemes emerged under this theme. The subcodes include: More Representation of African American women, Students Activities pertaining to African American Female College students' culture, and Challenges of African American Female Students.

More Representation of African American Women. The majority of the participants desired the rural community college to have additional representation of people who look like them on campus to include students, faculty, and staff. Several students expressed being the “only Black person” in classes and how that made them feel uncomfortable and out of place. One participant stated that she felt like she did not “belong.” Eve stated that she is always the only Black female or person of color in math and science classes. Eve also shared that the first class she attended where she was the only Black person in the class, she felt “at first it was a bit scary.” Eve was feeling that the other students in class would not want to partner with her on assignments and projects. Susie stated being the only Black person in class, “I can't relate to all of my peers, my colleagues, or the staff as much as I want to.” She also stated that “sometimes it gets a little rough, you know, feeling like I don't fit in enough, or I just don 't feel comfortable, you know, going to staff” to discuss challenges or venting about frustrations. Jane shared that she was attending a history class on WCC's campus and “slavery came up, you can feel the tension” and “all the like all the eyes shift to you when those topics come with you” being the only Black person in the class. Jane also stated that “people always want your opinion about it, but at the same time they don't really want to hear it, because most of them can't stand the truth.” These

participants felt a sense of isolation at times on rural college campuses when there are not any other Black students in the class, or a Black professor is not teaching the class.

Several participants who were nursing students expressed that their rural community college did not have any Black women who are part of the nursing faculty. These participants said it would be beneficial to have someone who looked like them in the classroom. According to the participants, sometimes the white female professors do not understand the challenges that were specific to Black women. When talking about Black female nursing professors at WCC, Jolly stated if they had Black female faculty, it would be “like my people are in here, too, doing good things, you know, making things happen and like kind of encourage you, you know.” These participants felt having African American nursing faculty to provide encouragement, support, and served as a role model to rural African American female community college students was much needed for Black female nursing students. Susie stated that she and another African American female student had a conversation with Dr. Beck (pseudonym) lead nursing faculty at Waterway Community College about not having African American faculty in the nursing program. The next week, Dr. Beck put together a class presentation about the limited number of African American women as nursing faculty in higher education. According to Susie, Dr. Beck told the students that she was going to make it her mission to recruit people of color to be nursing faculty. Susie was smiling when she said this and was glad that Dr. Beck listened to them and is “going to make it her mission to recruit more nursing faculty of color.”

Several of the participants who are nursing students really appreciate Dr. Beck for supporting African American females in the nursing program at WCC. Susie stated that “Dr. Beck is amazing.” The participants who are nursing students shared that even though there are not any Black women or men who are nursing faculty at WCC, they still feel supported and can

reach out to the faculty with questions as they are readily available to help. Cassandra shared it would be nice to have Black faculty but there were representation of Black nurses at the nursing program's clinical sites. She stated that when "we go to clinical we get a lot of nurses that look like us." Cassandra also stated that the nursing faculty were supportive even though they do not look like them. Another participant who was a nursing student reported that the nursing faculty is supportive to all the students and recommended the participant for a scholarship for Black female students.

Sasha shared that seeing other Black women on campus was a motivator for her success. She admired the Black women who work at WCC, and they inspired her. Sasha shared that she was proud of her accomplishments right now. Recently, she received a fellowship with a banking organization and was meeting people in top leadership positions. Sasha was the only student selected to developing the plan to welcoming the new leader of the WCC's community college system. Sasha stated that she was proud of the opportunity to represent her rural community. Miranda shared that it is also important that other Black female students "support one another" towards reaching their educational goals.

Students Activities focused on African American Female Students' Culture. A majority of the current study's participants shared the importance of rural community college campuses sponsoring student activities that celebrate and highlight their culture. Several participants shared the need of rural community colleges to sponsor support groups for African American female students and how it would be beneficial and helpful to receive support from other Black women. A couple of the participants shared that it is important to try to make friends with other Black female students on the rural community college campus, "so you are not going through the hardships alone."

Chanel and Giana discussed having sports that the women can play together like basketball. Several participants talked about having Black women in different careers and industries to come to campus and share their stories about their career journeys. Also, participants shared that the support group could take trips to learn about different cultures and history pertaining to African American people. Susie expressed that she and other Black females would be interested in having student groups featuring music and dance clubs at the rural community college. One participant shared that she does not have many friends on campus and there are limited student activities for Black females to participate in at the rural community college.

Challenges of African American Female Students. The majority of participants discussed the burdens of having so many responsibilities. This included being a college student, working full or part-time, being a parent or caretaker, participating in social and community activities, and taking care of their homes. Miranda shared that she dealt with stress, but college assignments increased her stress level. Chanel talked about how she tries to do everything herself even if family members, friends, and others ask her if she needs help. She responds with “no” and “try to be so independent.” Chanel stated “but in actuality inside it's like, I want to scream” because she was feeling so overwhelmed with her life and really needs the help but does not feel she can accept or ask for the help. Black rural female college students have the feeling they must be strong and always ready to take on more and that is what is expected from them.

Black female rural community college students are caretakers of not only immediate families but extended families, neighbors, coworkers, etc. Ann shared that her husband recently asked if she would be willing to help extended family by allowing young children under the age of 10 to come and reside with Anne and her family. Ann said she thought about the extra

responsibilities and told her husband “no.” She could not allow this to occur as she would have to give up attending the rural community college. Ann said she felt bad but could not care for additional children. Her decision caused tension between herself and her husband. Ann emphasized that she had to look out for her wellbeing and did not want to stop attending college.

Several of the participants felt that Black female rural community college students have to work harder than other students at the rural community college. Susie stated, “as a Black woman I have to work a little bit harder and have to go the extra mile.” Several participants felt that other students have advantages that Black female students do not. Miranda shared how in a couple of the classes she was taking at WCC that are in interactive video, where the professor rotates between the two campuses where the course occur at both campuses at the same time. She described a situation in one of the interactive video classes where students at WCC south campus received additional help to pass quizzes where the WCC north campus students did not receive the same assistance. Miranda reports that the majority of the students at the WCC south campus are white and the majority of the students at the WCC north campus are Black female students. She found out about the extra help because one of the Black students at the WCC south campus shared the extra help with the WCC north campus students.

Theme: Personal Resiliency is Key to Black Female Student Success. Participants were asked about the most important personal quality to achieving success for Black women college students. The majority answered having a strong support system, being resilient, and making their family proud. Participants shared that their support system provides financial, emotional, and/or academic assistance when needed. When asked what a “strong support system looks like,” the majority stated having my family, friends, and college faculty and staff to help

me on this educational journey. Ann stated she is “amazed by my strength” to be able to work full time, care for her family and household, and volunteer to tutor others.

Participants also shared how setting academic and career goals were motivators for them. Bre shared that the goal of earning an Associate degree is a personal goal for her and she is striving to major in a career where she can be happy and fulfilled. Alana and Kassandra stated that they want a better life. Ann knows that to meet her goal of being a teacher, she has to complete her education, and it starts at earning the Associate degree at her rural community college. Participants shared about sacrificing time away from family and friends to focus on their assignments and schoolwork.

Family Support. In the African American culture, family does not always mean blood relatives. Family can be identified as not only those in one’s household, but also those in the community including friends and coworkers. When Alana talked about support, she stated, “I felt like giving up” and wanting to quit her job and school, but her mother encouraged her to stay in school and to look at the goal of earning her Associate degree. Kassandra shared that the nursing program is very “rigorous” and she was not able to work and help out with her family financially. She was grateful that her fiancé’ paying the bills while she is in school. When Ann talked about having difficulty in a math course, she shared that one of her coworker, who is a math teacher at the local high school was tutoring her twice a week.

All of the participants talked about the support of their families, and most referenced their “mother” and/or their children. Going to college and persisting towards earning their Associate degree was the goal. Several stated that they want to make their mother and/or children proud. Kassandra, Chanel, Ann, and Sasha all talked about making their children proud, being a role model for their children, and how their children are their biggest motivators. The majority stated

that their mother provided encouragement and advice when needing to make academic, career, and personal decisions. Looking at her finances, Ann thought about quitting school and looked at getting a better paying job. She shared this revelation with her mother. Ann stated that “my Mom put me in check” and told Ann she is going to continue taking courses in school to be able to get a better paying job and encouraged her to stay in school and to continue on her current job.

Chanel stated that her mother was very supportive and encouraged her to finish school. Chanel visits with her mother often, sometimes doing schoolwork at her mother’s home with sketchy internet service. Eve shared that her mother is the one who encouraged her to attend the local rural community college instead of the four year university. She stated that “my mom, who was really helpful with pushing me and making sure that I’m not over doing it.” Eve admitted that she was one who often “take on a lot of work.” Her mother was “also a big backbone for me” and provided encouragement and support to continue at the rural community college when Eve wanted to quit. Miranda shared that her mother provided encouragement. Miranda does not have a driver’s license but her mother and father both provide her transportation to and from the rural community college.

Rural Community College Campus Supports. Campus support is important for the success of Black women college students. Sasha stated that “Student Support Services (TRiO program) is her village.” When asked to explain that statement, she said “they are there to support me day or night return calls or emails within 12 hours.” Eve shared that her SSS/TRiO counselor was “like a coach” by providing encouragement, giving her campus and community resources, and explaining different options for situations that may arise. Eve shared the example of withdrawing from a course after she was involved in a car accident on her way to rural community college campus. Eve began having headaches after her car accident and Mr.

Goodman (pseudonym) “helped to guide me regarding the next steps” in her academics and physical health. “He encouraged me to take care of my health in order to continue with school.” Eve also stated that “Student Support Services was able to like, be my voice when I wasn't able to do certain things on my own.” She stated that the TRiO counselor is helping her with transferring to the four year school after graduation. He has helped Eve by coordinating meetings with the representatives from the four year school to discuss transfer options and programs.

Bre shared how she know the college advisors were busy, but they take the time to meet with her to help her to choose classes that align with her major and career goals. She also stated that if she email Mr. Goodman (pseudonym), he will respond to the- email and schedule a time to follow up with her question, even if he does not know the answer. He will find the answer and quickly respond.

Emotional Support and Motivation. The majority of the participants shared that going to college and persisting in college will make their mother, family, sister, etc. proud. Also, it was important to be a role model for younger family members. Susie shared that her “number one supporter is her family’ as they provided emotional and financial support to her. Ann stated, “my children are my pushers.” In her home, Ann has a calendar where she writes upcoming class assignments with the due dates. She stated that her children will remind her of the dates the assignments are due. Ann was proud that she had a 4.0 grade point average and how her children were proud of her. Ann’s goal is to graduate with a 4.0 grade point average.

Several participants talked about transportation being provided by their family. One participant stated “I don't have transportation. I'm working on that. My mom and dad and also my sister make sure I have a way to and from the college.” Many of the participants utilized the public transportation that is free for college students to ride to and from the college campus.

Several participants discussed having emotional challenges to include feeling stressed, dealing with anxiety, scared, not having enough money, grief, and other challenges. Chanel shared that during the COVID-19 pandemic, she was grieving the death of two family members, one was unexpected. She stated life was “very challenging and overwhelming.” Susie also talked about how the nursing faculty referred her to free counseling services sponsored by the rural community college that she can utilize when she is struggling mentally. Miranda shared that during the pandemic WCC began having “safe space” meetings using Zoom where a representative from the local community services board counseling center discussed mental health topics and allowed students to share mental and emotional challenges. She also said WCC sponsored workshops where the counseling center staff would come and talk about mental health topics such as depression and anxiety. She felt that this support was very helpful.

Some participants stated that they deal with self-doubt and sometimes do not believe in their academic ability. Several participants shared how they did not have the self-confidence in certain subjects. Ann stated, “I am not very good in English and math.” Miranda stated that her mother, father, and older sister helps when she doubts herself, gives her encouragement, and tells her “just keep doing your best” and keep looking towards your academic goals. Miranda also stated that “I'm an overthinker and I worry about stuff that I shouldn't have to worry about.” When talking about self-doubt, Jane talked about “being called the ‘n-word’ by white people” in her neighborhood and stated that “things like that kind of like affect you mentally like. Oh, if I wasn't Black, my life would be so much easier.” She would compare herself to white students and stated, “if I wasn't Black, I would be able to like, do this a lot easier.”

Stereotype Threat and Disparate Cultural Expectations. Several students talked about having to “code switch” and to speak differently around students and faculty that do not look like

them and not being able to be themselves. Jane stated, “it feels like you always have to be like careful, what you say or how you act because you don't want to play into that the stereotype.” Jolly stated when she was around the one Black female student in the class, she could talk to the other Black student and be herself and knew the other African American student understood what she was saying. Giana talked about not wanting to feed into the stereotypes that others have about Black women. Some of the stereotypes that Giana shared included “We don't know much. We're not smart. Our hair is nappy.” When Giana stated those negative stereotypes, determination and tenacity was in her voice as you can feel in her being that she will not live up to those negative stereotypes. Another participant talked about how others think “every Black person acts, and we are all the same. You want to show them that there's more to Black people than the stereotypes.” Jane wants to be treated with dignity and respect and wants others to know “that we [Black women] are actually like humans and have personalities and everything.”

Several participants shared how they speak differently in their home communities and workplace. Ann shared that there is small number of minority employees at her job at the local high school. Originally from the Caribbean, Ann shared the importance of speaking the correct English when she is at work. She also volunteers and teaches members of her Caribbean community the English language and culture. Another participant stated that even though members in her rural community are segregated, she is comfortable being around people of different cultures. She is able to adjust and communicate within those spaces. Miranda and Chanel shared that can speak comfortably and be more of their selves with their family and friends who are members of their culture and rural community.

Participants also shared how setting academic and career goals were motivators for them. Bre shared that the goal of earning an Associate degree was a personal goal for her and she was

striving to major in a career where she can be happy and fulfilled. Alana and Kassandra stated that they want a better life. Ann knows that to meet her goal of being a teacher, she has to complete her education, and it starts at earning the Associate degree at her rural community college. Participants shared about sacrificing time away from family and friends to focus on their assignments and schoolwork.

Personal Development: The Importance of Self-Efficacy. Several participants stressed the importance of Black female college students to use their voice. Giana said Black women should “speak up and voice your opinion.” Another participant said when she first started at the rural community college, she was shy but now she talks more and shares her opinion with others on campus. Kassandra stated it is important to “advocate for yourself” when it comes to the professor or something at the college that you do not agree with, “I’m gonna ask until I found a way.” It is important to be persistent and use your voice in the rural community college .

Several participants talked about “believing in yourself.” Jane stated “just believe in yourself. Know that you're not the only one, even though it feels like it sometimes” and to “connect with other students on campus from similar backgrounds who can encourage you.” Kassandra stated that to obtain your educational goals, “don't give up.” She also stated that “if you want it, you can achieve it.” Sasha stated, “we need to pursue what we want and continue to push towards it, because the world needs to see more brown skinned people in general achieving goals and beating odds.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains the findings of semi-structured individual first and second interviews from twelve African American female students who attend a rural community college. The current study was guided by the theoretical frameworks of the Black Women College

Success model (Commodore et al., 2018) in order to address the research questions. The study participants provided rich and descriptive data during two interview sessions. Four themes emerged from the data: (a) *Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages Marginalized Students*, (b) *The Rural Community College's Culture is Important*, (c) *We Need More Representation of Black Females on the Rural College Campus*, and (d) *Personal Resiliency is Key to Black Female College Student Success*. The themes produced subthemes that outline the unique lived experiences of African American/Black female students on rural community college campuses persisting towards their Associate degree.

African American female students are attending community colleges campuses, but there is limited research on the lived experiences of Black women attending rural community colleges. This included how their identity was impacted by being a minority and a woman and the importance of this population's voice to be heard in academia. Hopefully, this research will begin conversations about the African American/Black female's experiences on the rural community college campus.

Chapter Five will review the present study, summarize the findings, compare the findings of my study to previous research on this topic, discuss the meaning of the study, provide recommendations for leaders, and suggestions for further research to advance understanding of success for African American/Black female students attending rural community colleges.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

African American women are choosing community college as an avenue towards reaching their educational and career goals (Bates, 2012; Lindsey, 2020). For students who have historically been underrepresented on college campuses, community colleges offer an important point of access to higher education (Ginder et al., 2017; Lindsey, 2020). These institutions offer “open door access” to a diverse student population who may question their academic ability or skillset (Everett, 2020; Lindsey, 2020). Many of these students are juggling numerous responsibilities outside of college including being caretakers, working, and commuting to the college campus (Ebanks & Francois, 2022). Personal and family obligations, lack of degree attainment, employment and poverty levels are heightened for African American females in rural communities (USDA, 2017).

The community college in rural communities is an avenue in accessing higher education for traditional and nontraditional students (Korich, 2014). The identity of rural America is centered around rural white American culture (Cain & Willis, 2022). When rural community college students was mentioned in academia, the focus was on the lived experiences of white students, or race was not mentioned or considered as a factor. In order to create more equal educational opportunities for minority students, it is crucial to understand how race and rurality intersect (Downey & Means, 2016) along with gender. In order to help students successfully navigate the academic pipeline, it was important to know the students’ needs and experiences in rural community colleges. In Means et al. (2016) study, despite their worries about the economy and desire to leave their area, rural students talked about the opportunity to give back if they returned after graduation.

In much of the research, African American female college students' experiences was either grouped with all African American men and therefore not able to determine the unique experiences of African American females or investigated with women of other ethnicities and races. There were very few studies focusing on Black female students attending rural community colleges' campuses. This study may serve as a medium for the voices of African American female college students attending a rural community college. The findings may ignite crucial conversations for rural community college's leadership about the relationship between student persistence, motivation, and the ways that rural community colleges can support Black female students and assist them in reaching their academic and career goals. Institutional policies and resources must be created with Black women in mind or with their input. The rural community college is to address structural, political, and representational intersectionality (Haynes et al., 2020). Therefore, there was a need for understanding and supporting the Black female rural community college students' unique lived experiences.

This chapter included a discussion of major findings as related to the literature on the reasons African American females chose a rural community college to attend whether or not they graduated with an Associate degree. The chapter concluded with implications for future research and a brief summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study was to examine the reasons African American female students chose to enroll and attend a rural community college to further their education and persist towards graduation with an Associate degree. The findings of the current study should be of interest to community college leaders, administrators, faculty members, governing board members, and others who are interested in enhancing the community

college experience and success of African American female students attending rural institutions. This study may also provide African American females with the knowledge and means for persisting towards a degree while dealing with academic and life challenges.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this current study:

1. What are the unique experiences of African American female students that influenced them to enroll and attend a rural community college?
2. What unique experiences contributed to African American female students to persist or not persist to the completion of an Associate degree at a rural community college?

Summary of the Methodology

This researcher utilized qualitative research methodology by collecting data from virtual individual semi-structured interviews using Zoom technology. Purposeful sampling was used in selecting study participants. The researcher completed a study of this phenomenon by using open-ended interview questions focusing on the lived experiences of African American females students at one rural community college. The goal was to design open-ended questions that lead to the final result of rich, descriptive answers to the research questions (Smyth et al., 2009).

The researcher conducted initial interviews and follow up interviews with twelve participants who met the current study criteria. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using Zoom transcription service. After each interview, the researcher downloaded the Zoom transcript to check for edits and analyze the data to identify themes. Each participant was sent their transcript for review.

Using the theoretical framework of the Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018), the researcher identified emerging themes through

multiple readings of the collected data using the interview transcripts and reviewing each recorded interview. After reviewing the data set by searching for common themes and patterns, open codes were developed (Adu, 2021; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The researcher reviewed the transcripts and placed codes to key phrases by using the edit feature in Microsoft Word. The researcher highlighted words and phrases that were chosen to represent answers to the research questions. Using Microsoft Word, the researcher developed a chart with code labels and subcategories. The chart included the “actual spoken words of the participants” (Manning, 2017, p.1). The researcher combined similar codes and themes while examining the codes in relationship to the research questions and theoretical frameworks. The researcher identified common themes that addressed the research questions.

Member checking was used to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the current study. Each participant was emailed their transcripts to review for accuracy. They were also sent the current study’s findings by email to review to ensure proper portrayal of the meaning of their statements (Hays & Singh, 2012; Shenton, 2004).

In the following sections, the researcher will share major findings and discuss how they may contribute to the growing body of research related to African American/Black females students attending rural community colleges. The researcher also shared how the findings relate to the literature, recommendations for rural community college practitioners and administrators, and recommendations for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study was the Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018). This “holistic model of Black women college student success is a student-centric persistence model, meaning the focus is placed on actions the student can and/or should take to navigate her undergraduate years from

entry to exit” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 84). The model includes “three phases: prior to college, during college, and after college” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 66). This current research study considered the experiences of Black female rural community college students in the “During College” phase as they persisted towards an Associate degree.

The themes that developed from the analysis aligned with the Commodore et al.’s (2018) model in the “During College” phase. The components include the student’s “identify development, external assets, non-cognitive skills development, and values and commitments” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 67) while the study participants are being impacted by challenges. The current study participants experienced developing their identify based on their unique lived experiences but also on how others perceived them include faculty, professors, peers, family, and the community. The participants shared how they sometimes have self-doubt regarding their academic ability due to prior educational experiences. The participants also shared how they have to believe in their own ability is important for them to persist.

The study participants desired to have more women who looked like them on the rural community college campus. The importance of having African American women who are employed on college campus to be mentors for Black female college students. Many shared the they experienced isolation on rural community colleges as many stated that often they are the only Black person in their classes and feel out of place. This finding aligns with the Commodore et al.’s (2018) model regarding the isolation Black women feel on college campuses.

In the findings, the study participants are resilient and continue to persist even when they are overwhelmed and have multiple responsibilities. According to the model, the Black women will earn passing grades and graduate with a degree. In the rural college campus, Commodore et al.’s (2018), model states that all Black female college students will share “similar outcomes” (p.

81). The model is meant to be broadly relevant to the population of Black college women among ages, diverse identities, geographies, and different educational institutions (Commodore et al., 2018). This model is one that can be utilized within multiple educational spaces where Black women are present and the women in the current study had similar experiences.

According to Commodore et al., 2018, the higher educational institution is not without responsibility of supporting the Black female student. Colleges that are committed to serving Black female students need to update the outdated policies and incorporate changes based on the needs of this marginalized population. This includes listening to the voices, needs while supporting of African American female rural community college students while having them be members at the “table of decision making” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 102). The findings of the current study confirm that the study participants were supported and felt welcomed when seeking assistance at the rural community college, however rural community college’s policies and programs have not been developed regarding the needs of African American female students

Summary of the Major Findings

This section discussed the major findings from the data collected from the individual semi-structured interviews as it related to the theoretical framework of the Conceptual Model of Black Women College Student Success (Commodore et al., 2018). This phenomenological study addressed two research questions about the lived experiences of African American females who choose to apply and attend a rural community college and persist towards an Associate degree. An analysis of the data revealed four themes: (a) *Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages Marginalized Students*, (b) *The Rural Community College’s Culture is Important*, (c) *We Need More Representation of Black Females on the Rural College Campus* and (d) *Personal Resiliency is Key to Black Female College Student Success*. Each theme produced subthemes that

detailed the unique lived experiences of African American/Black female students on rural community college campuses persisting towards their Associate degree.

The current study participants stated a number of reasons why they chose to attend a rural community college. The reasons stated include: the low cost of a college, not ready to leave home, the smaller class sizes, goals of a “better life” and employment opportunities. Several study participants shared they were experiencing a medical challenge or were caring for ill family members that influenced them to attend the rural community college. This educational opportunity was the best option to pursue their academic goals.

The majority of participants emphasized the value of attending a rural community college since it gave them the correct direction and encouragement while they pursued their degree. The participants were grateful for the support from the faculty and staff at the rural community college providing individualized assistance and guidance in maneuvering the higher education arena. They shared how receiving assistance in completing college entrance application, help in finding ways to pay for college through scholarships and financial aid, and assistance from college advisors in choosing the correct courses were all invaluable experiences.

Also discussed was the importance of forming relationships with the faculty and staff in order to meet the participants’ academic goals. The participants shared the genuineness of the rural community college faculty and staff. The current study participants were impressed with faculty and staff members’ availability. Several participants discussed that this was in contrast to the challenges and difficulties they experienced as a student at the four-year university trying to receive guidance and schedule meetings with the professors. Several participants shared how the faculty and staff motivate them to do well in courses.

Based on their relationship with faculty and staff, several participants felt comfortable sharing challenges with the rural community college faculty and staff. Several of the participants shared with faculty/staff that they were having financial hardships, experiencing food insecurity, mental health challenges, and housing insecurity. Several participants also shared they were overwhelmed with life. When the faculty and staff at Waterway Community College became aware of these noneducational barriers, participants received help. This included food from the rural community college's food bank, grocery store gift cards, gas cards, and assistance paying for rent. This support is an immeasurable help to African American female students to persist towards their educational goals at the rural community college.

The majority of the current study participants expressed their desire that the rural community college include additional representation of people who look like them on campus to include students, faculty, and staff. Several students expressed being the "only Black person" in classes and how that made them feel uncomfortable and out of place. Unfortunately, WCC's nursing program does not have any African American men or women as instructors. The majority of the nursing faculty are white women. The participants who are nursing students appreciate the support they received from the nursing faculty, but would prefer to also have nursing faculty who are also Black women. This would give encouragement and a role model as they pursue their nursing degree.

The majority of participants talked about how they have numerous responsibilities. This includes being a college student, working full or part-time, being a parent or caretaker, participating in social and community activities, taking care of their homes, etc. Several of the participants feel that Black female students have to work harder than other students at the rural community college. One participant stated, "as a Black woman I have to work a little bit harder

and have to go the extra mile.” Several participants feel that other students have advantages over Black female students. Other students understand how to maneuver the higher education system, have additional financial support from their families, and may not have the additional home responsibilities. Many of the African American female students do not have the social capital or knowledge to maneuver the higher education system. These barriers can make the Black female student feel isolated in a space without representation.

When discussing what is most important to the success of Black women college students, the majority of the participants shared the importance in believing in oneself, speaking up for one’s self and having a strong support system. One of the motivators for Black female rural community college student is the being able to believe that they have the abilities to be a college student. The strong support system was identified as family and college support. The majority of the participants expressed the importance of making their family proud to including their mothers and children. The participants are happy to have the opportunity to be a role model to their children and younger siblings. The support from family to include providing financial assistance, to transportation to the college, or helping with childcare and household responsibilities are needed to support these women on their academic journey.

The participants felt that the rural community college promoted a sense of belonging for African American female students when the college sponsors activities promoting and celebrating the African American female’s culture. The participants believed a college sponsored support group for African American female students on rural community college campuses would be helpful and provide a space where the students do not feel alone and could have a group that could celebrate their accomplishments and provide advice when needed.

The participants also desire more in-person, evening, and weekend classes offered at nontraditional times. Black female rural community college students would like additional in person courses about their culture to be on the rural college campus. Examples include an African American History class or an African American literature class.

The themes of *Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages Marginalized Students and Rural Community College Culture* overlapped regarding the support from the faculty and staff. Each participant shared they are overall are pleased with their choice of the rural community college to pursue their educational goals. The one participant who is leaving the rural community college to attend the veterinary school shared that WCC was a “bridge for her “to the next institution and that main reason she is leaving is because of her major. She also stated that she does not regret her time at WCC and that is “bittersweet” for her leaving. Two of the participants were not accepted into the nursing program but are pushing forward to earning their Associate degree. Both are planning to reapply to WCC’s nursing program. This speaks volumes regarding the tenacity of the participants but also the importance of genuine, effective, and available support from faculty and staff at the rural community college

Findings Related to the Literature

The literature review in this study focused on models and framework of the factors that influence African American women choice of a rural community college to persist towards an Associate degree. Each of the four themes were prominent factors in understanding the reasons African American female students attend a rural community college and persist even in the face of adversity. Each theme is described in the following section along with the relationship with the literature review.

Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages Marginalized Students

The majority of participants emphasized the value of attending a rural community college since it gave correct direction and encouragement while they pursued their degree. The participants who are members of the Student Support Services/TRiO Program stated they benefited from the one-on-one college advising and support from the SSS/TRiO advisor. The findings of the current study support Betting and Baker's (2014) study regarding utilizing *Inside Track*, a one-on-one individualized intrusive advising program with college students. Betting and Baker's study found that over the two year time period, the program increased student retention from 9% to 12%. One on one advising is one of the supports that are beneficial for African American female rural community college students to persist.

Interviewees cited the importance of relationship building with faculty and staff which is a subtheme and the importance of someone to help them to maneuver the higher education system. First Year Experience interventions are specifically designed for the successful transition to college life for first-year college students (Robbins et al., 2009). These programs provide support to the students' academics by developing relationships with faculty and student affairs staff. In order to support college student success, the student receives intrusive advising, intensive student orientation programs, financial aid assistance, assistance with enrollment in college courses, and assistance with understanding the educational system from their college advisor (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020; Strayhorn, 2015). According to Parnes et al. (2020), engaging minority students during their first semester is crucial in order to build relationships and give them the support they need to succeed academically. According to Strawn's (2019) study support the importance of rural students building relationships at the rural community college. The current study is consistent with the literature that discusses the positive impact rural

community college's faculty and staff development of relationships with African American female students to support their persisting towards their academic goals.

The Rural Community College Culture

The vast majority of participants like how simple and accessible the rural community college is to maneuver. The convenience of being able to contact professors and college advisers was mentioned by a number of participants. The majority of the participants appreciated the access to online offerings for courses as many have a hectic schedule with work and home responsibilities. This theme supports the findings in the study conducted by Hachey et al. (2013) where it was emphasized how community colleges provide flexible practices, such as online courses and responsive programs to meet a wider range of learning needs at a reasonably low cost.

More Representation of African American Females

African American female students would like more people who look like them on the campuses of the rural community college. Within the college setting, Black college students feel "invisible" within the classroom setting" (Solorzano et al., 2000). This is more of the case based on the college's faculty and staff composition (Steele, 2017). According to Howard-Hamilton's study (2003), how much we value the ethnic diversity that students bring to school relies on how well they develop personally. Black female students' identity development may be negatively influenced if they do not see faculty and staff on the college's campus who look like them (Steele, 2017).

Black students see a limited number of African American women in faculty and administrative positions on rural college campuses. According to Gamble and Turner's (2015), the limited number of Black administrators at higher educational institutions creates a barrier for

African American students. Harris and Lee (2019) state that Black female college students strive in educational settings where Black college faculty and administrators serve as role models and provide support.

In academia, much of the focus is on the difficulties and challenges faced by African American men in academic research, therefore African American women may be forgotten by the administration (Walpole et al., 2014). It is imperative to make them feel as though they are part of the rural community college campus. Black female college students can be empowered by offering educational opportunities within co-curricular and scholarly environments to fulfill the requirements of this unique student population, in an effort to supporting a healthy identity for these women (Henry, 2013).

One of the subthemes of this theme is *Challenges of African American Female Rural Community College Students*. In the current study, participants discussed not living up to the negative stereotypes of Black female colleges students. This is in alignment with the literature on how Black female college students have been exposed to racialized stereotypes about Black women, including those that emphasize "Superwoman" qualities and microaggressions that are conveyed on college campuses and in society (Commodore et al., 2018; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Research conducted by Abrams et al. (2014) reported that on college campuses, Black women are assumed to be able to understand assignments and directives without being given the grace and supports that are afforded to other populations. In the current study, the rural community college campus provides supports and resources to the African American female student. The majority of the current study participants feel supported on the rural community

college campus. Several shared the access to online and in-person tutoring services. The majority of the participants were given resources to support their academic and personal needs.

Personal Resiliency is Key to Black Female Student Success at Rural Community Colleges

African American women come to the rural community college with strong resilience and coping strategies. When supporting African American female college students, community college educators need to have a thorough awareness of the special strategies these women have developed to succeed in college (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Unfortunately, some Black women believe they have to project a strong image because of the trials and tribulations faced by other African American women who overcame their challenges (West et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Community colleges professionals need to be aware of the importance of the various aspects of identity formation among female African American community college students and how these can affect interactions in the classroom and among campus communities (Ritchey, 2014). This study concludes that is imperative to understand the importance of having representation of the student population as faculty members and leaders on the college campus in order to provide a sense of belonging. Understanding the unique needs of African American female rural community college students' needs is in line with the literature that supports understanding their academic and nonacademic needs regarding their persistence.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

African American female rural community college students is a population that is missing in the academy. Black women have continued to face discrimination when it comes to educational opportunities, including fair and equitable access to an education. The rural community college is the avenue for African American women to enroll and persist towards their

educational goals. The rural community colleges need to be ready to support this growing student population. In order to support Black women in rural communities, it is crucial to comprehend the educational experiences of this population (Nichols, 2021).

Few academics have investigated the relationship between racial/ethnic identity, rurality, college access, selection, and ambitions (Means et al., 2016). There are even fewer on the lived experiences of African American females decision to attend the rural community college to persist toward educational goals. As rural community colleges are becoming more diverse, this researcher desires for this study to begin conversations beginning in rural community colleges to identify the best practices regarding developing and updating policies, programs, and course offerings to African American females on their campuses.

As an administrator on a rural community college campus, this researcher sees the smiles of African American women as they see another Black woman, a college employee in the hallway or are sitting in the classroom where the researcher teaches an introduction to college course. The importance of having someone who looks like you gives students a sense of belonging but also a place to aspire to be one day. It is imperative for the rural community college to embrace this student population on their campuses.

Implications for Action

Rural areas are sometimes referred to as “education deserts”: places with few or only one college option (Lee & Pirog, 2023). Often the choice of a postsecondary institutions for those with limited time, finances, and transportation options comes down to a for-profit institution or a community college. Some of the participants in the current study faced these very limited options, and they reluctantly selected the community college. The following will outline the

implications community college leaders, faculty, staff, and African American female community college students.

Implications for Community College Leaders and Advisors

The purpose of the current study was to help community college leaders create learning environments which proactively attract African American female students. Marginalized students will often respond to direct and proactive contact from the college. Based on the findings of the current study, direct, proactive services for female African American students should include:

- advisor-advisee meetings between the student and college staff when the student is most motivated and receptive to assistance;
- one-on-one meetings with financial aid staff to complete the FAFSA;
- specialized orientation courses which focus on African American female students;
- specialized summer programs for African American female students.

In the current study some participants shared having difficulty in math and not having self-confidence in this subject area. Academic advisors and faculty could connect African American female rural community college students to tutoring in math courses at the onset of the semester. During advising meetings, when discussing course offerings and schedules, the academic advisor could ask questions regarding the students' past experiences with math. After reviewing math placement scores and high school transcripts, if the student report struggling with math, the student could be linked to in person or virtual math tutoring. This extra academic support may help students to be engage and feel more comfortable in math courses.

Implications for Rural Community College Student Activities

African American female students are often first-generation college attendees with limited knowledge of the college experience. Further, college attendance, even at a local

community college can create psychological “separation” from family which can make these students feel even further marginalized. These students may, then, feel isolated and turn away from the college-related social interactions that lead to a greater likelihood of persistence. Social integration is important to the success of all marginalized and first-generation college students, but perhaps it is even more important for African American females in rural places. Strategies to help these students might include connecting students to their peers, college staff, and student organizations, which can help them establish a sense of place and belongingness on the rural community college campus.

Additionally, the finding of the current study addressed the importance of campus sponsored student engagement activities that are specific to African American female college students at rural community colleges. This will help to develop a sense of belonging and community for African American female students and build connections with the members of the rural community college campus. Based on the findings, campus sponsored events could include:

- promotion of colleges clubs and organizations to the African American female students; marketing materials need to be reflective of the African American female’s culture, i.e., having pictures of Black female college students on the promotional materials;
- recruitment of African American females in student leadership organizations, i.e. college student ambassadors;
- encourage Black female students to participate in student clubs, sports, cultural enrichment activities, student government, book clubs, etc.

The rural community college's student activities program could sponsor support groups for African American female students at the rural community campus lead by a Black faculty or staff member. This support group can be considered a "safe space" for the Black female students to have conversations regarding challenges and also to celebrate accomplishments with other Black female students. The group can sponsor guest speakers who are African American women to share information about their educational and career paths.

African American women may also benefit from mentoring programs with a leadership component. This program can give African American female students from the rural community college the opportunity to be mentored by African American female faculty or staff member at the rural community college or a Black female community member. This is an opportunity to give African American female students someone that they can look up to while developing networking, professional skills, and communication.

Implications for Rural Community College's Foundation

The current study supports the need to financially support African American female college students on rural community college campuses. The rural community college's foundation staff could produce opportunities to develop scholarships specifically for African American female students. This can occur by recruiting donors or funding sources that would specifically support this student population. For example, the rural community college's foundation staff and the college's leadership could sponsor a fundraising luncheon for scholarships for Black female students. The event could include guest speakers who are African American women who are current students and/or community leaders to discuss the needs, career opportunities and aspirations for this student population. Invitations would be given to the

persons of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. This event could become an annual event with a planning committee comprised of current African American students and alumni.

Implications for Community College Deans, Faculty and Staff

Based on the findings, rural community college leaders, faculty, and the curriculum committee could implement course offerings emphasizing African American women's culture and experiences, for example an African American Women's History course. These courses could be in person and online. The college's leadership could make sure the course meets the curriculum requirements for transfer credits at the four-year institutions. The college's marketing team could advertise the new courses on the rural community college's website and social media platforms. Academic advisors would encourage African American female students to enroll in the new courses.

Rural community college educators, staff and administrators could benefit from understanding the needs of African American female rural community college students on their campuses through professional development regarding the needs of African American female students. Rural community college faculty members could incorporate culture sensitive teaching practices within their courses and receive trainings on how to implement this practice in their courses.

The following can be implemented on rural community college campuses:

- additional course content highlighting the African American experience in the course content
- faculty and staff to participate in annual cultural sensitivity and bias training to have a better understanding of the effects of systematic racism on Black students, especially Black females

- sponsoring roundtable sessions to discuss societal racial disparities of the African American woman.

Implications for Rural Community College's Leadership

The results of this study support the importance of increasing the number of students, faculty, and staff who are African American females on rural community college campuses. The development of a strategic marketing plan to recruit more Black female students may be beneficial to rural community college campuses. This plan can be formed through a work group to include student recruiter, Dean of Enrollment Management, college's marketing staff, current African American female students and alumni. This group could develop marketing materials that reflect this student population. The recruitment work group could also sponsor in person and virtual open houses for potential African American female students. These open house events could include a tour of the college campus by African American female students, a student lead panel discussion of the reasons to come to the rural community college and a time for the attendees to network and talk with one another.

Representatives from the workgroup could visit and recruit potential African American female students from the local high schools. They could also canvas the community by visiting locations where the potential recruits may be located, i.e. churches, beauty salon, local businesses, community advocacy groups, and special events, i.e., farmers' markets.

The development of a recruitment plan to recruit African American women as employees, would be led by the rural community college's leadership to include human resources, deans, and current specified employees. This plan can include the development of a partnership between four-year Historically Black Colleges and University's (HBCU) graduate schools' deans and faculty and the rural community colleges leadership, comprised of the

human resources director, academic deans, financial aid director, etc. This partnership could allow the rural community college's leadership to visit the HBCU (virtually or in person) and encourage African American female graduate students or graduates to apply for open positions as adjunct faculty, full time faculty, part-time/full time advisors, or tutors for the rural community college. The rural community college's leadership may also sponsor a special open house inviting the African American female graduate students to tour the rural community college in person or virtually to meet some of the students, faculty and staff, and community leaders, i.e., county administrator.

African American women would also benefit from the rural community college's leadership to understand the negative impact of systematic racism on Black students, especially Black women. Unfortunately, many of these students do not have access to social capital in order to maneuver the higher education system. When developing policies and programs, this marginalized population would benefit from the college's leadership to have empathy and understanding of the impact of historical racism on Black women in American society.

Implications for African American Female Rural Community Student

Lastly, the results of this study support the importance of the role the Black female college student has on her success on the rural community college campuses. The African American female rural community college student should:

- give herself grace and understand she cannot do everything herself;
- define what success is and develop goals and timelines;
- use her voice to advocate for herself on the rural community college campus, with her family, and in her community;

- ask for help when needed from faculty and staff, family, and community members;
- engage with others Black women on the rural community college campus and
- develop meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, and community members.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although the present study offered some insight on the unique lived experiences of African American female students on rural community college campus, additional research on this student population is needed and may be beneficial, especially at rural community colleges in the states located in the far southern United States and regions of the United States where there is a large population of African American women. The researcher suggests expanding the study across multiple rural institutions. This current study can be expanded by incorporating focus groups in order to obtain additional rich, descriptive data. This present study can be replicated using quantitative research with a larger number of participants.

Community college leaders would also benefit from additional research focusing on the lived experiences of nontraditional African American female rural community college students; the lived experiences of traditional age African American female rural community college students; and on the reasons why Black women enroll in a short-term workforce credential. These data may impact future programming for the rural community college.

Concluding Thoughts

One of the goals of the current study was to allow the voice of a marginalized group, African American female rural community college students to be heard regarding their lived experiences of choosing the rural community college to further their education. Based on the research study, four themes emerged: (a) Breaking Institutional Barriers Encourages

Marginalized Students, (b) Rural Community College Culture, (c) More Representation of African American females on the Rural College Campus and (d) Personal Resiliency is Key to Black Female College Student Success at Rural Community Colleges. Each theme produced subthemes that described the unique lived experiences of African American female students on rural community college campuses. Rural community colleges are welcoming environments for African American female students.

The current study participants shared the lived experiences as African American/Black female students on rural community college campuses. My hope is that rural community college administrators, faculty, staff, and African American female community college students will utilize the findings of this study to develop programs to recruit, retain, and graduate a larger number of African American female students on welcoming rural community college campuses across the nation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment of Research Study Participants' Email

Greetings. My name is Lorraine Justice and I am currently a doctoral student at Old Dominion University. I am gathering data for my dissertation to study what factors influence African-American female students to attend a rural community college and persist towards graduation with an Associate degree. I will be conducting two interviews, an initial interview which will ask open ended questions and seven days later a follow up interview to receive additional information based on your answers from the first interview.

The interviews will be conducted using zoom and will be recorded. For confidentiality, I am asking that you use a pseudonym that you develop. All recordings and transcriptions will be saved on a password protected cloud storage and computer. After the interviews have been transcribed and checked for accuracy, the recording will be deleted.

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the Demographic Questionnaire which will take you approximately five minutes to complete the form. You can access the Demographic Questionnaire with the following link: <https://forms.gle/cv4yS6Q3wBRYsKXg7>.

If you have any questions or would like to see the completed research, I can be reached by phone at 804-986-8073 or by email at ljust002@odu.edu. Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix B: Demographic Questions for Student Participants

What pseudonym or name do you want to be referred to in this interview (please do not use your legal name)? _____

What is your age? (choose one)

Under age 25

25 and over

Racial/Ethnic Background (choose one)

African-American/Black Asian/Pacific Islander Caucasian Hispanic

Native American

Other _____

How many college credits have you completed? (choose one)

1-12

13-24

25-48

more than 48

I don't know

Appendix C: Research Study Description for Recruitment of Participants

According to many experts in the higher educational field, there is little research available regarding the reasons African-American women choose to attend a rural community college. Most of the research that exists offers general information about the success rate of minority students and/or African-American students which include African-American males and females grouped together. The title of the study is “Factors Influencing African American Women to Attend a Rural Community College and Persist Towards an Associate Degree.” The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study is to examine the factors that motivate African American female students to attend a rural community college to further their education and persist towards graduation with an Associate Degree. The study will include the use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews as the primary research approach.

If you have any questions or would like to see the completed research, I can be reached by phone at 804-986-8073 or by email at ljust002@odu.edu. Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Document**OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY**

PROJECT TITLE: Factors Influencing African American Women to Attend a Rural Community College and Persist Towards an Associate Degree

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say YES or NO to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say YES. The title of this research project is Factors Influencing African American Women to Attend a Rural Community College and Persist Towards an Associate Degree.

Data for the study will be collected via a screening survey and one interviews related to your experiences as a student in a rural community college conducted through video-conferencing.

RESEARCHERS

Responsible Principal Investigator: Dr. Mitchell Williams, Associate Professor, Darden College of Education and Professional Studies, Educational Foundations and Leadership

Investigator: Lorraine A. Justice, PhD Candidate, Darden College of Education and Professional Studies, Community College Leadership

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study is to examine the factors that motivate African American female students to attend a rural community college to further their education and persist towards graduation with an Associate Degree. Several studies have been conducted regarding the motivation of college students attending an institution of higher education. None of them have researched what motivates Black female community college students to attend a rural institution.

If you decide to participate, then you will join a study involving research of what motivates African American women to attend a rural community college. If you say YES, in a 60-90 minutes, semi-structured interview, you will be asked questions regarding your experiences as an African American female student attending a rural community college. The interview will be through video-conferencing (Zoom). Approximately 10 students and/or alumni will be participating in this study.

EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA

You should not be less than 18 years of age, as that would keep you from participating in this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

RISKS: There are no identifiable risks known at this time. With any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified. To reduce the possibility of risk, the researcher will not identify the participants or the community college involved in the research in any written or oral reports of the research. Instead, pseudonyms will be used for participants and the institutions involved in the study to maintain confidentiality and protect all identities. The geographic location of the study participants will be described as Southeastern United States.

Following transcription of the interviews and completion of data collection, the interview zoom recordings will be deleted. All documents and files generated during the study will be stored on the investigator's password-protected, laptop computer and in password-protected internet cloud storage accessed only by the investigator.

BENEFITS: The main benefit to you for participating in this study is the opportunity to share your voice and opinions as an African American/Black female student attending a rural community college. Your views and experiences, may influence programming and services to support African-American women on rural community colleges' campuses.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS

The researchers are unable to give you any payment for participating in this study.

NEW INFORMATION

If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will give it to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The researchers will take reasonable steps to keep private information, such as the screening survey confidential. The researcher will remove identifiers from all identifiable private information collected. Data will be stored for up to five years in a locked, private office, or alternative protected space, of the researchers. In addition, electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer to which only the researchers have access. After five years, digital audio files will be destroyed. Identifiers will be removed, and the de-identified information used for future research without additional informed consent from the participant. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications; but the researcher will not identify you. Of course, your records may be subpoenaed by court order or inspected by government bodies with oversight authority.

WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study -- at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University, or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled.

COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY

If you say YES, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event of harm arising from this study, neither Old Dominion University nor the researchers are able to give you any money, insurance coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. In the event that you suffer injury as a result of participation in any research project, you may contact Dr. Mitchell Williams, the principal investigator for this study, at (757) 683-4344 or mrwillia@odu.edu, Laura Chezan, the current chair of the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Committee at 757-683-7055 or lchezan@odu.edu, and current IRB chair at Old Dominion University, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research at 757-683-3460 who will be glad to review the matter with you.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them:

Dr. Mitchell Williams, (757) 683-4344

Lorraine A. Justice, (804) 986-8073

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should call Dr. Laura Chezan, the current IRB chair, at 757-683-7055, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757-683-3460.

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher should give you a copy of this form for your records.

Subject's Printed Name & Signature	Date
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INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

I certify that I have explained to this subject the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and any experimental procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws and promise compliance. I have answered the subject's questions and have encouraged her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

Investigator's Printed Name & Signature	Date
--	-------------

Appendix E: Participant Interview Protocol for African American Female Students

Attending a Rural Community College

Opening script:

Greetings. My name is Lorraine Justice and I am currently a doctoral student at Old Dominion University. I am gathering data for my dissertation to study what factors influence African-American female students to attend a rural community college and persist towards graduation with an Associate degree. I will be conducting an initial interview and a follow up interview with you.

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive research study is to examine the factors that motivate African American female students to attend a rural community college to further their education and persist towards graduation with an Associates' degree. I hope it will lead to conversations and formation by community college leaders to have a better understanding of supports, programs and process that can be implemented to support African American/Black female students on campus of rural community colleges.

The initial interview will include several questions that I will ask you about your background and your experiences as a college student at a rural community college campus. The first interview will take about sixty to ninety minutes. During the second interview, I will ask follow up questions to expand on your answers from the first interview. The second interview will last no longer than 30 minutes.

I really appreciate you for taking the time to talk with me today. Do I have your permission to record our interview using Zoom video-conferencing? The recording will help me make sure I do not miss any part of your interview. During the interview, please use your

pseudonym for your name and type it on your zoom name plate. As a reminder, you and your community college will remain anonymous for this study.

In order for you to participate in the study, I need to receive your consent. I will be reading the Consent Form to you and if you agree please sign the fillable Consent Form that I have emailed to you and email it back to me (I will read the consent form).

As a reminder, you will have the right to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a bit about your background and how you decided to become a student at your rural community college?
2. Describe your experiences as a student at your community college. How has your experiences if at all, as a Black woman impacted you as a student at your rural community college?
3. Who have been the support structures that have been instrumental in your persisting life at school? What actions, procedures, services or people (on and off campus) helped you as a college student?
4. What challenges or barriers have you faced attempting to persist in college?
5. Reflecting on your time as a student at your rural community college, what would you say is the most important to the success of Black women college students?
6. Is there anything you would like to share with me that you feel will be important to the study?

I would like to schedule our second interview within seven days to ask some follow up questions to your responses from today. When would you be available for the second interview?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Sharing your story and perspective allows a voice that is sometimes not heard by rural community college leaders, policy makers, and students who look like you. Again, I thank you time today. If you have any questions or concerns, prior to the second interview, I can be reached by phone at 804-986-8073 or by email at ljust002@odu.edu.

Appendix F: Second Interview Protocol

Opening script:

Greetings. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the study. I have reviewed your first interview. I have some follow up questions based on your answers from your first interview. (I will proceed with asking questions).

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me today. For your participation in the study, you will receive a \$10 gift card. What is the best way for me to give the gift card to you?

Thank you again, your answers have been invaluable to this study. If you have any questions or would like to see the completed research, I can be reached by phone at 804-986-8073 or by email at ljust002@odu.edu. Again, thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix G: Exemption Letter



OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

Physical Address

4111 Monarch Way, Suite 203
Norfolk, Virginia 23508

Mailing Address

Office of Research
1 Old Dominion University
Norfolk, Virginia 23529
Phone(757) 683-3460
Fax(757) 683-5902

DATE: January 20, 2023

TO: Mitchell Williams
FROM: Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee

PROJECT TITLE: [1989953-1] Factors Influencing African American Women to Attend a Rural Community College and Persist to an Associate's Degree

REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact John Baaki at (757) 683-5491 or jbaaki@odu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee's records.

VITA

Lorraine A. Justice, MS

HOME: 460 Happy Hill Road
Tappahannock, Virginia 22560
Phone: 804-986-8073

WORK: Rappahannock Community College
52 Campus Drive
Warsaw, Virginia 22572

EMAIL: ljust002@odu.edu

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND:

2014 - current Ph.D. Community College Leadership, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
2010 M.A., Nonprofit Leadership and Management, Walden University Baltimore, Maryland
1992 B.A. Social Work, Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2022-Present Director, TRiO Programs (Student Support Services & Upward Bound)
Rappahannock Community College, Warsaw, VA
Responsible for managing and administering the Student Support Services and Upward Bound TRiO grants to include forming and monitoring budgets, monitoring students' progress, completion of annual performance reports, recruiting students, developing programs, and supervising counseling and administrative staff.

2011-2022 Administrative Officer for Student Support Services,
Student Development
Rappahannock Community College, Warsaw, VA
Responsible for managing and administering the Student Support Services grant to include forming and monitoring budgets, monitoring students' progress, completion of annual performance reports, developing programs, and supervising counseling and administrative staff.

2011- Present Adjunct *Instructor, Student Development*
Rappahannock Community College Warsaw, VA
Responsibilities include teaching an in person introductory to college course at the undergraduate level.