

**In Spite of the Odds: Exploring How Black HBCU Graduates Successfully Navigated PWI
Graduate Programs**

by

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Black graduates from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) who transitioned to and successfully navigated Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for their graduate programs. Utilizing a qualitative research design focused on narrative inquiry and oral storytelling, this research centers the voices of the graduates as experts of their own experiences. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with fourteen graduates, the study examines how these individuals leveraged their HBCU backgrounds to foster resilience and achieve success in PWI environments. The data analysis, guided by Afrocentric constructivist principles and the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, highlights the agency, cultural affirmations, and support systems that facilitated their academic journeys. This research contributes to Black student success scholarship by presenting counternarratives that challenge deficit perspectives and underscore the importance of culturally responsive support structures in higher education, especially graduate education. The findings provide insights into effective strategies for supporting Black graduate students in diverse academic settings, emphasizing the critical role of community engagement and cultural identity in their success.

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List of Abbreviations

ADAF	Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework
AGEP	Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate
BGLO	Black Greek Lettered Organization
HBCU	Historically Black College and University
IRB	Institutional Review Board
NLSY	National Longitudinal Study of Youth
NSF	National Science Foundation
PWI	Predominantly White Institution
SGA	Student Government Association

Chapter 1: Introduction

“The function of the university is not simply to teach breadwinning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.” (W.E.B. DuBois, 1903)

W.E.B. DuBois’s sentiment surrounding the university and its utility to impact the lifelong learning and development of scholars is still relevant today. Scholars studying the evolving educational landscape, especially the challenges faced by Black Americans in accessing quality education note the historical and ongoing struggles. (Allen & Jewell, 1995; Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 1903; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Williams et al., 2021; Woodson, 1990). Since the emancipation proclamation and the end of slavery, Black education was seen as a means of “defending and extending” their emancipation and demonstrated a determined effort for Black Americans to educate themselves (Allen & Jewell, 1995). They were denied access to predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and had to create their own institutions to continue their pursuit of educational opportunities. These historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have existed for more than 100 years and have been prominent contributors to educating Black students but have not been studied as fully in academic discourse as prominent subjects in academic inquiry (Brown & Freeman, 2002, p.238). There were concerted efforts made to institutionalize Black education across disciplines and academic settings as Black Americans fought for equity in educational attainment at all institutions. They would continue to face obstacles that would challenge their ability to attend, persist, and graduate from institutions of higher learning.

Educational disparities in degree attainment impact Black Americans access to socioeconomic success for generations to come. Research has continued to demonstrate a gap in educational attainment for Black individuals compared to their counterparts. As of 2022, 27.6%

of Black Americans aged 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 34.5% for non-Hispanic Whites and 51% for Asians (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Black Americans make up roughly 9% of all advanced degrees attained in 2022, indicating a need for focused research on supporting Black students from undergraduate to graduate programs.

Many institutions struggle to support students' successful pathway through postsecondary pipelines due to not clearly understanding the student population they serve nor the circumstantial "for whom and why" that address student needs (Higher Learning Commission, 2018). Even today, events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the great resignation have exacerbated the changes in higher education which do not always support the continued success of Black students in postsecondary environments. While Black Americans have more access to higher education than in times past, there are still barriers that affect their ability to navigate the entirety of academia and situate them peripherally to academic success in the research, classroom, and in practice making them anomalies of their own experience.

Statement of the Problem

Research on student success has evolved significantly over the decades, incorporating a broader understanding of what constitutes achievement in educational settings. Initially focused on academic performance, contemporary research now emphasizes holistic well-being, social-emotional growth, and personal and professional development (Thomas & Hill, 2023; Williams & Johnson, 2021). Despite these advancements, disparities in student success persist, particularly among Black students. Historical and systemic barriers continue to impact their educational trajectories, leading to higher attrition rates and lower degree attainment compared to their peers (Harper 2012; Harper & Simmons, 2022; McGee & Bentley, 2020; Strayhorn, 2012).

“The classical models of education attainment have had so little efficacy for Black students in general, and Black college students in

particular, that the enrollment, retention, and graduation experiences of Black students in both predominantly White and predominantly Black universities remain a pressing – if [not] understood – phenomenon” (Smith, 1991)

The study of Black student success, particularly at the graduate level, is critical due to the unique challenges these students face. Recent research highlights ongoing and new challenges for Black graduate students. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shifts in higher education have exacerbated existing disparities (Johnson et al., 2022; Mitchell & Thompson, 2023). Black graduate students experience challenges such as systemic barriers, psychological and emotional hardships, and financial strain that impacts their ability to navigate the higher education environment (Anderson & Carter, 2022; Trammell et al., in press; Williams & Davis, 2023). Research also indicates that Black graduate students often encounter a lack of representation, insufficient mentorship, and institutional biases that hinder their academic progress and overall well-being (Griffin, 2020). Additionally, the intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic status further complicates their educational experiences, necessitating targeted research and interventions (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). To explore these challenges, recent studies have highlighted the importance of culturally responsive support systems and inclusive academic environments in promoting the success of Black graduate students. Scholars like Shaun R. Harper and Estela Mara Bensimon have emphasized the role of equity-minded practices and the need for institutions to critically examine and address systemic inequities (Bensimon, 2021; Harper & Simmons, 2021). Moreover, the work of scholars such as Terrell L. Strayhorn and Tressie McMillan Cottom provides insights into the specific barriers Black graduate students face and offers strategies for fostering resilience and persistence (Cottom, 2021; Strayhorn, 2020).

While these challenges are prevalent within the graduate experience of Black students, Black students, especially Black graduate students have historically been positioned as outliers in student success research. Scholars have made concerted efforts to offset deficit-oriented research by exploring Black student success from the voices, experiences, and values of the Black student. This work must continue as scholars address the systemic and individual issues Black students face in educational pursuits through critical, solution-focused research that empowers and promotes change across educational systems. Research on Black student success in all aspects must continue to examine the experiences of Black students from their lived realities and understand the sociocultural contexts that students must navigate to find success. This research is crucial not only for improving individual outcomes but also for addressing broader societal inequities. By ensuring Black graduate students can thrive, we contribute to the diversification of academic and professional fields, fostering innovation and promoting social justice. Understanding and addressing the factors that influence the success of Black graduate students is therefore essential for creating equitable and inclusive educational environments that benefit all students.

To continue investigating Black graduate success, researchers should continue to produce literature that centralizes the experience of the Black graduate student and counteracts prominent Eurocentric thought surrounding the Black student experience in higher education. This research could incorporate endarkened theories that adopt more culturally responsive worldviews surrounding truth and knowledge or provide success narratives from Black scholars that supplement the problem-oriented research focused on their deficits. Adopting a theoretical framework that illuminates the salience of Black graduate students in academia could increase student agency and ability to achieve by presenting counternarratives to dominant discourse that

helps Black students see themselves as successful actors in their educational experience. The framework should recognize the significance of socio-cultural contexts on education as well as the support needed for students to perform and succeed in academic environments. The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework could provide academic stakeholders the opportunity to engage with Black academics in strengths-based ways to support their interests and investment in education.

The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provides strengths-based solutions rooted in the cultural identity and experiences of Black students (Harper, 2007, 2009). It allows researchers, educators, and academic stakeholders the opportunity to centralize the needs of Black students and facilitate support that increases their persistence. While educational research should identify vulnerable populations that are struggling to thrive in academia, there should be a counterbalance that recognizes the ability and resilience of these students and provides support to overcome academic challenges. Past studies on Black student experiences in college focused primarily on undergraduate students and their social adjustment to their college environment. While the majority of the studies on Black graduate student experiences focus on their adjustment or lack of adjustment to the program, there are few studies that examine the differences among HBCU and PWI graduates in graduate programs and none that have examined the successful experiences of Black HBCU graduates in PWI graduate programs from their perspective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black HBCU graduates have successfully navigated PWI graduate programs. Success in this context is defined primarily as a Black graduate who has graduated from an advanced degree program. This research will explore the

Black HBCU graduates' perspective of success in PWI graduate programs through the following primary question and sub questions:

How did Black HBCU graduates successfully navigate graduate programs at PWIs?

- a. How did Black graduates' beginning educational experiences shape their identity around success and higher education?
- b. How did Black graduates' HBCU experiences situate them in success preparing for graduate school?
- c. How did Black graduates enact success strategies navigating their PWI graduate program?

This research aims to construct meaning around the themes that emerge from the stories of Black academics while exploring the tenets that the Black community shares when operating in potentially othering spaces.

Significance

This study is significant because it centers on the experiences of Black students who have been “othered” or relegated to a marginal position in the research. It also provides a counternarrative to the dominant problem-focused literature that could help educators understand how Black graduates perceive success and what it takes to successfully navigate graduate education.

How learners feel about the setting they are in, the respect they receive from the people around them, and their ability to trust their own thinking and experience powerfully influences their concentration, their imagination, their effort, and their willingness to continue. (Tatum, 2007, p. 22)

Feagin and Sikes (1995) encourage researchers and educators to “listen closely to what Black American students tell us about what happens to them and how they feel, act, and think” (p. 91). Incorporating the experiences of Black graduates who have successfully navigated their

academic environment can provide replicable models that can be utilized by higher education institutions and academic stakeholders committed to the success of Black graduate students seeking advanced degrees. This research could have a significant impact on how Black students' see themselves reflected in the literature, encourage students' interest in pursuing advanced degrees, and help students find community and support to successfully matriculate in their graduate degree program.

Researchers must continue to examine Black student success in postsecondary environments from a critical constructive lens to unpack the traditions of power and oppression regarding how education is accessed and to complicate the narrative surrounding Black graduate student persistence in higher education. Looking at Black graduate success from centering paradigms allows researchers to look beyond the immediate results of students' experiences and incorporate socio-historical context to how Black graduates as agents can engage with institutional actors within and outside the classroom environment. Furthermore, deficit assumptions about Black graduate students should be supplemented by asset-based research that speaks to the successes of Black graduates from positive truth orientations without augmenting them as high-achieving or high-ability.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter 1 highlighted the need for equity-focused research illuminating successful practices that impact Black degree-seeking students. Chapter 2 will provide a literature review of the student success literature and the theoretical underpinnings that guide this study. Student success encompasses a broad and evolving spectrum of academic achievement, holistic well-being, social-emotional growth, and personal and professional development. This literature review delves into the progression of student success research, from its foundational theories to modern advancements. It also explores the critical examination of equity and inclusion within educational environments. The Afrocentric perspective and Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework will then be introduced as a guiding lens to understand and engage in intentional research that fosters growth and success for Black scholars across their academic tenure in graduate programs.

Student Success

Student success has been a subject of extensive research that aims to understand the multifaceted scope of achievement and well-being among learners. At its core, the concept of student success goes beyond academic achievement to include holistic well-being, social emotional growth, and personal and professional development. As student success is studied to understand how learners navigate knowledge, development, and social integration pathways, it has been the premise of educational inquiry and seeks to illuminate how individuals' educational trajectories are impacted by these dynamics.

Historical Perspective

The emergence of student success research can be traced back to the seminal works of researchers such as John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky. These education pioneers began to study the relationship between the individual and the learning environment, examining how social interaction impacted the relationship dynamic. Dewey's ideas emphasized the notion that learning is a holistic, experiential process (Dewey, 1938). At the heart of his work, Dewey believed that learning and knowledge came from the experiments and observations individuals engaged in by interacting with the environment around them. His vision for education laid the foundation for contemporary theories of student success that prioritize the development of the whole person, or the whole student. Vygotsky's ideas of education centered around the premise that individuals acquire knowledge from their interaction with their social world (Vygotsky, 1978). His sociocultural theory provides another foundation for student development emphasizing the importance of social interaction and cultural contexts. Introducing the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), Vygotsky explored the difference between what the learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from others. His ideas surrounding scaffolding and cultural engagement transformed educational psychology and still inform student success theories today.

Building on these foundational ideas, scholars like Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser further developed the conceptual framework of student success by proposing comprehensive models of student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Their seminal "Seven Vectors" model outlined the various aspects of college student development, examining growth and exploration as the interconnectedness of intellectual, social, and personal development. This holistic perspective highlighted the importance of addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of

students to aid in their well-being and success. Other scholars, such as Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget, would continue to engage with educational theory surrounding learning and development that would pave the way for further research and practice to promote student success in diverse educational contexts (Gardner, 1983; Montessori, 1912; Piaget, 1952). These psychologists provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals learn and develop providing educators with the opportunity to create learning environments that cater to the personalized, holistic development of the student. Their empirical studies provide a scientific foundation for educational research and practice that shape student success research and practice.

Student Success as Persistence

As educators continued to support the learning and development needs of students, educational institutions grew concerned with student attrition and degree completion rates. Thus, the focus of student success research expanded to include issues surrounding retention and persistence in higher education. Scholars like Vincent Tinto provided groundbreaking insights to the complex factors influencing students' decision to persist or withdraw from college, illuminating the role academic and social integration had on fostering belonging and commitment to educational pursuits. Tinto's (1993) "Student Integration Model" asserted that student persistence is influenced by two factors: academic and social integration. Academic integration focuses on student engagement with academic activities, such as coursework and faculty interactions while social integration focuses on students' sense of belonging involving campus life, and connections with peers and faculty. This research suggested that students were more likely to persist when they felt academically and socially integrated into the college environment. Subsequent research would further unpack the factors that influence student retention and success trajectories, identifying key indicators of success within early academic

achievement, sense of belonging, support relationships with faculty and peers, and access to resources and support services (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The emergence of retention and persistence research represented a significant milestone in the field of student success, revealing the complex challenges higher educational institutions and educators face supporting students' academic and social integration.

Contemporary Research in Student Success

In recent years, student success research has faced a paradigm shift fueled by advances in technology, data analytics and socio-emotional learning metrics. Institutions have used technology and big data to identify at-risk students early on and implement proactive strategies to support their academic progress and well-being (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Kuh, 2008;). Additionally, there has been growing recognition of the importance of socio-emotional learning in promoting student success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Research has shown that non-cognitive factors, such as growth mindset, resilience, and emotional intelligence play a vital role in shaping students' academic and social well-being. Contemporary scholars have called for more holistic approaches to student success, seeking broader indicators of well-being and fulfillment. This includes promoting students' socioemotional competencies nurturing their sense of belonging and purpose and cultivating a culture of equity, inclusion, and belonging. Institutions and educators have thus invested in research and initiatives that create supportive learning environments where students feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed.

The evolution of student success research reflects the nuance and development of theoretical insights, research, and practice that aim to understand and improve positive outcomes for learners across the educational landscape. Student success encompasses more than just

academic achievement; it incorporates holistic well-being and equity-focused support and resources for all students. The insights gleaned from the student success research have significant implications for educational practice, policy, and leadership, influencing the way institutions and educational stakeholders approach teaching, learning, and support services for personalized success outcomes of all students. Research on student success should continue to prioritize evidence-based strategies for promoting academic achievement, student retention, and holistic development while also addressing any systemic barriers to equity and inclusion of all students that impact their growth and success.

Black Student Success

Student success research continued to expand as researchers became interested in the experiences of marginalized and underrepresented student populations and how they achieved holistic success in higher education. The literature revealed disparities in access, resources, and support that contributed to higher attrition rates among these students (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008; Terrell, 1990)). This emerging critical examination of equity issues in higher education extended the scope of student success to address systemic barriers that impede student success and implement targeted intervention strategies to support the success of minoritized student groups. Targeted research on various marginalized student groups became necessary to understand the scope of support and services needed to promote positive student success outcomes in different educational environments. Thus, the study of Black student success developed as a mechanism to address the achievement, retention, and degree attainment disparities of Black students and promote strategies and resources that influence Black student success across educational research, policy, and practice.

Historical Perspective

The study of Black student success in research is rooted in a complex historical context shaped by centuries of systemic racism, oppression, and resistance (Anderson, 1988; Harper, 2012). It delves into the interplay of historical legacies, inequalities, and contemporary challenges that Black students face in educational settings. Situated in a broader context of educational equity and social justice, this field of inquiry seeks to understand and address the unique challenges and opportunities that shape the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students. At its heart, Black student success research recognizes the historical struggles and triumphs of Black communities in their quest for freedom through educational advancement and empowerment. From the era of slavery to the present day, Black individuals and communities have fought tirelessly to overcome oppressive systems and practices that limit their access to education and pathways to advancement. Black educators, activists, and scholars, such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, and W.E.B. Du Bois leave a legacy of resilience, creativity, and determination about Black communities in the face of adversity.

The origins of Black student success research can be traced back to pivotal historic moments, such as the Reconstruction era following the Civil War (Anderson, 1988; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Du Bois, 1935; Ducote, 1961). Following the abolishment of slavery in the United States, the Reconstruction era presented a brief opportunity for Black individuals to pursue education and civic participation. Black communities showed remarkable resilience and determination in their quest for educational advancement despite the immense changes and resistance they faced. A pivotal development that aided in their resilience was the establishment of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) across the South. These institutions

would serve as a beacon of hope and opportunity for Black students aspiring to pursue higher education and will be discussed further in a later section.

As issues of racial inequality and educational segregation were brought to the forefront as a national crisis, legislative reform like the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision in 1954 would influence more in-depth research on Black student success. This case declared segregated schools unconstitutional and marked a turning point in the struggle for educational equity. While *Brown v. Board of Education* paved the way for greater opportunities for Black students, the general consensus of desegregation was met with resistance and continued disparities in educational resources and outcomes. In response to the challenges Black students were facing, scholars and educators advocated for research that understood the root causes of educational inequity and develop strategies to promote academic success and social mobility.

The Rise of Black Studies and Critical Race Theory

The United States would then see a rise in Black and Ethnic Studies across postsecondary landscapes which would be a significant milestone in the quest for educational equity and social justice, providing a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives in academia (Glaude, 2007; ; King, 2005; Ransby, 2003; Williamson-Lott, 2006). In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, interdisciplinary fields of study challenged traditional narratives and perspectives in education, history, and social sciences, making way for more inclusive and diverse curriculum. Black Studies, also known as Africana Studies or African American Studies, arose as a response to the marginalization and long-standing neglect of Black history, culture, and contributions within mainstream educational institutions. The first Black Studies program was established in 1968 at San Francisco State

University after a student-led strike demanding greater representation of Black perspectives and experiences in the curriculum (Smith, 2003). Scholars would continue to advocate for the establishment of Black Studies programs within colleges and universities to reclaim and celebrate Black identity and heritage leading to a movement within institutions across the country. The adoption of Black and Ethnic Studies programs across institutions represented a paradigmatic shift in higher education that challenged Eurocentric thought surrounding knowledge production and relative truths. This approach provided space for marginalized voices and perspectives to be heard while focusing on student success through facilitated critical dialogue, community engagement, and social activism.

Increasing the critical dialogue surrounding Black student disparities and challenges, the Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the late 20th century (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT provided a theoretical framework for analyzing the intersections among race, power, and education challenging mainstream approaches to understanding racism and discrimination. Scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins and Gloria Ladson-Billings have investigated educational issues from a CRT lens to further understand issues surrounding educational access, opportunity, and achievement among Black students (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994; hooks, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Recognizing the intersectional nature of educational inequities and the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and other social dimensions is necessary to address systemic and oppressive practices that impact Black students' tenure in higher education. It is also vitally important for Black student success research to utilize other endarkened and emboldened theories to continue centering the experiences and voices of Black students and

communities, creating more inclusive, equitable, and just opportunities within the educational system to empower all students.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have a rich, complex history that is intertwined with the struggle for African American education and civil rights in the United States. The existence and tenure of HBCUs trace back to the era of slavery when enslaved individuals were prohibited from learning to read and write or even being taught to engage in educational activities for advancement (Brown, 1984). Well into the Jim Crow era, African Americans were systematically denied access to existing educational institutions as they were predominantly White and had discriminatory admissions and enrollment policies based on racial segregation laws. Even after the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, educational opportunities remained severely limited as exclusionary practices continued further perpetuating system inequalities and reinforcing structures of racial hierarchy within academia (Patterson, 2001; Wilder, 2014). There were few avenues available for Black individuals to pursue degrees and professional careers. The Black students who gained admission to White institutions often faced inequitable treatment from faculty, staff, and peers in the forms of hostility and reinforced isolation. These hostile environments made it almost impossible for Black students to succeed academically and socially. Thus, the creation of HBCUs was driven by the critical need to address systemic racism, provide equitable access to higher education opportunities, and cultivate a supportive learning environment where Black students could thrive intellectually, socially, and culturally.

Various philanthropic organizations like the Freedmen's Bureau, Black churches, northern missionaries, and government initiatives established schools and facilities to educate

newly freed slaves leading to institutions such as Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) and Fisk University emerging. One of the earliest HBCUs being Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, founded in 1837 as the Institute for Colored Youth (Anderson, 1988). These educational institutions worked to provide academic and vocational education to African Americans and would influence the emergence of other Black institutions that served to educate African American people. Other schools would begin arising with the Second Morrill Act of 1890 which provided federal funds for states to establish separate land-grant institutions for Black students or enforce admission policies that did not restrict by admission by race. The donation of public lands led to the founding of colleges focused on agriculture and the mechanic arts such as Tuskegee University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NCAT), and Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University (AAMU) to name a few. HBCUs would face numerous challenges throughout their history including limited funding and unequal resources yet they would persevere, nurturing the success of generations of students, most of which would make significant contributions to society in various fields.

Whereas racial prejudice and discrimination pervaded many mainstream educational institutions, HBCUs emerged as centers of advancement and power to educate African American individuals seeking to uplift themselves and their communities (Drewry & Doermann, 2004; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). These universities were responsible for cultivating leaders who would continue to inspire social advancement for all Americans and promote the social equality and mobility of Black Americans (Drewry & Doermann, 2004). There were opportunities for Black students to pursue academic excellence, engage in co-curricular activities that fostered further professional identity development, and take part in social activism without the imposed racism and segregation reinforced by American society outside of the institution. HBCUs would play a

pivotal role in activist movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, where faculty and staff would lead in protests and advocate for change and advancement.

HBCUs were especially vital in preserving African American heritage, culture, and intellectual traditions (Adams, 1999). Affirming the value of African American history, literature, and contributions to society, HBCUs emphasized cultural identity which garnered a sense of pride and belonging among faculty and students. Scholars were able to form these cultural identities through engagement with community-oriented events such as homecoming, pep rallies, Greek life, student government, and many other HBCU traditions that helped scholars grow (Kimbrough, 2012). These institutions provided culturally relevant pedagogy that reflected the lived experiences and perspectives of Black individuals, giving Black students the opportunity to see themselves as central to their education. Even today, HBCUs provide safe havens for Black students who have had to navigate the nuances of a sociopolitical climate that has repeatedly and demonstratively harmed Black communities and families through systemic and overt policies and practices. Having intentional curricula and conversation around the realities and plight of Black Americans position HBCUs as the champions of Black culture and safety as they equipped students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful.

Despite these contributions, HBCUs still face challenges related to institutional capacity, funding, and resources. Many HBCUs struggle with limited funding and endowments, relying heavily on state and federal funding, and have to contend with other universities that have the resources and capacity to provide more opportunities to Black students. Because of the mission of HBCUs, they implement inclusive admission and enrollment practices that provides access to students who would traditionally not be accepted to universities with higher admission criteria. Moreover, the cost of attendance at HBCUs is typically cheaper than most universities removing

the financial barrier to attendance for most students. With that, HBCUs often serve a disproportionately high number of low-income students, further straining their resources and limiting their capacity leading to the institution coming up with creative, out-of-the-box ways to support their students' needs. Critics of HBCUs argue that these institutions struggle with academic quality and institutional effectiveness that impact the success and rigor of the educational opportunities for Black students. There is even criticism that HBCUs perpetuate racial segregation and limit the opportunities for Black and non-Black students to collaborate and interact. The argument that the existence of HBCUs reinforces racial divides and undermines efforts for educational equality undermines the history and legacy of HBCUs and how they were established to address the elements they are being critiqued for. Thus, the competition HBCUs face from PWIs with greater financial resources, co-curricular and external opportunities, and reputation severely impact HBCUs' ability to attract and retain talented faculty and students and secure grants, donations, and corporate sponsors.

HBCUs continue to serve as vital instruments of educational equity, social justice, and community empowerment for Black communities. Serving as engines of opportunity, HBCUs maintain a strong commitment to academic and civic excellence while preparing students to adapt to the changing landscape of higher education and the workforce. HBCUs have expanded their academic catalogs, increased the pedigree and diversity among their faculty and students, and established strong collaborations with corporations and government agencies that enhance research, innovation, and funding. As exemplars of educational equity and social progress, historically Black Colleges and Universities reflect the resilience, determination, and collective efforts of Black Americans and continue to shape the future of Black communities as they continue to overcome centuries of oppression and discrimination.

HBCUs Impact on Black Student Success

HBCUs have been recognized as pivotal institutions that promote the success and empowerment of Black students in higher education. Research has shown that HBCUs have a positive impact on the academic performance and achievement of Black students, particularly in terms of degree attainment and graduate rates. Researchers have found that Black students who choose to attend HBCUs showed greater persistence throughout their collegiate experience ultimately graduating from college sooner than their counterparts at predominantly White institutions (Smith, 2008). Allen (1992) explored the comparative examination of degree attainment rates of Black scholars at HBCUs and found that HBCUs consistently ranked among the top institutions that produce Black graduates across various disciplines. In addition to producing Black graduates across disciplines, HBCUs also are responsible for producing more Black doctoral recipients. Joretta (2013) conducted a study examining the impact of HBCUs on the production of doctoral recipients and found that HBCUs are crucial in producing Black doctoral recipients with higher rates of doctoral degree attainment than their PWI counterparts. The research suggests that HBCUs provide a supportive environment conducive to academic success and advancement to higher levels of education for Black students.

HBCUs have also had a long history of academic excellence and student achievement, through their production of many notable scholars, leaders, and professionals who continue to make significant contributions to their fields and communities (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Allen & Jewel, 2002). Allen, Epps, and Haniff (1991) investigated the academic achievement and persistence of Black students attending HBCUs compared to those attending PWIs. Contrary to critiques surrounding the academic quality and rigor of HBCUs, they found that Black students demonstrate comparable levels of achievement and persistence to those at PWIs. This

research challenges the assumption that HBCUs provide inferior educational opportunities to students and underscores the effectiveness these institutions achieve in promoting Black success. HBCUs also offer invaluable experiences such as personalized academic support and mentorship. Faculty and staff at HBCUs are more likely to understand the unique challenges that Black students face and can provide more guidance and support that is rooted from a relatable lived position.

HBCUs offer Black students the opportunity to affirm their cultural identity, values, and traditions in a nurturing environment that further fosters their success. Having very strong roots in the community, HBCUs continue to be seats of great talent and power, fostering strong relationships with alumni and community members who donate their time, money, and service to further the advancement of Black scholars. Supportive campus environments and strong faculty mentorship contributed to Black student success at HBCUs as inclusive and empowering to student development and success. Palmer and Gasman (2008) studied the impact of HBCUs on African American male student success. HBCUs provided a richness of social capital by way of institutional, administrative, and social support that encouraged student success and persistence. Social capital is thus idealized through the adage “it takes a village to raise a child” (Palmer & Gasman, 2008) illustrating HBCUs as centers for support across the entire campus community. Perna et al. (2010) also found that the specialized support HBCUs provide for underrepresented women in STEM disciplines was crucial for their career preparation. Supports like mentorship programs, research opportunities, and networking initiatives helped to address the challenges women faced in STEM and promoted diversity and inclusion in STEM fields. These supportive elements established a strong network of support and resources for Black students helping them

to navigate higher education and increase their personal and professional growth while remaining academically salient at the institution.

Black students continue to face persistent challenges in accessing and succeeding in education. Disparities in resources opportunities, and outcomes persist and reflect the inequities still prevalent in postsecondary landscapes across the board. Despite these challenges, scholar-advocates and scholar-activists are committed to creating positive change and transformative action through their Black student success research. Educational researchers, community leaders, and grassroots organizations positions themselves as advocates by increasing the policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion in education for Black students. Thus, the study of Black student success in research is a testament to the resilient and enduring legacy of Black students and communities. It is essential to build upon the foundation of this study and continue to explore the experiences of Black students to understand how to support their needs in academia.

Exploring Black Student Success: Navigating Achievement Pathways

Black student success in academia is dynamic and complex, characterized by Black students' aspirations, challenges, and triumphs. Gaining an understanding of this nuanced journey requires a comprehensive exploration of factors that influence Black students from their entry into higher education to their progression into graduate programs and beyond. This section of literature will draw on research and scholarly insights to illuminate the different caveats of Black student success and highlight various achievement pathways.

Entry into Higher Education: Aspirations and Challenges

Deciding to pursue higher education represents a vital moment for many Black students as they aspire to have access to personal growth opportunities, socio-economic mobility, and

community. Black students often face extenuating circumstances going to college to including financial barriers, lack of preparation, and standardized testing metrics. Despite those challenges, Black students demonstrate resilience and determination in pursuit of educational opportunities (Schmidt, 2018). Research by Schmidt (2018) provides insights into the enrollment trends of Black undergraduate and graduate students, notating shifts in enrollment patterns over time. Using the data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) from the Department of Commerce, Schmidt explores the changing dynamics of Black student enrollment, highlighting the impact external factors such as economic and sociopolitical conditions have on educational decision-making. The study indicates a growing commitment to higher education for Black communities, highlighting the increasing enrollment of Black students in postsecondary institutions yet further illuminating the need to address enrollment rate disparities between Black and White students, particularly in graduate programs.

Academic and social factors such as precollege variables, sociocultural landscapes, and racial contexts also play a vital role in Black students' entry into higher education (Anderson & Hrabowski, 1977; Baker & Siryk, 1984; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1992; Williams, Palmer, & Jones, 2021). Research explores the academic trajectories of Black students, recognizing the importance of academic preparation and other performance factors on gaining admission to selective institutions. Beyond academic considerations, external influences also shape the entry and trajectory of Black students. Williams, Palmer, and Jones (2021) explore the impact of sociopolitical climates and racial contexts on Black student enrollment decisions. They examine how politics impact Black students' school choice, expounding on the relationship between sociopolitical factors and educational opportunities. Moreover, the study implies that the choice between HBCUs and PWIs represent a crucial decision point for many Black students. Williams

et al. (2021) suggest that Black students' enrollment choices are heavily influenced by how they perceive their social and racial dynamics at different institutions. Thus, their study opens the door for more dialogue surrounding societal forces that shape Black students' educational pathways and highlighting the need for creating more inclusive, affirming environments for Black students regardless of institutional setting.

Adjustment and Integration: Navigating Academic Terrain

Black students face many challenges adjusting to the academic and social demands of college life. This multifaceted adjustment process requires students to navigate academic rigor, cultural nuances, and socioemotional dynamics among various institutional contexts (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Gibbs, 1973; Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; Tinto, 2017). Research into Black students' transition in higher education sheds light on the challenges faced by Black students and the strategies they employ to navigate the academic terrain effectively.

Black student adjustment is comprised of social determinants that impact the way students navigate their academic institution. Baker and Siryk (1984) explored these determinates by adapting a scale that measures the role environmental determinants have on college adjustment. Identifying three primary constructs: academic, social, and personal-emotional, Baker and Siryk (1984) posited that adjustment to the college experience for Black students would vary on their unique needs and must be examined across their academic experience, social encounters, and intrinsic-extrinsic values they bring to the collegiate environment. Scholars also looked at the social determinants of adjustment through a socio-emotional lens. Students' perception of the institution and institutional actors also have significant implications on their ability to acclimate to college successfully (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; Tinto, 2017;

Von Robertson et al., 2005). Thus, adjustment requires students to integrate into the academic and cultural fabric of the institution in order to succeed and adjust no matter the institution.

Further examining the social and cultural nuances of adjustment, Black students had to contend with intersectional realities as they adapted to various institutional cultures such as their racialized identities, interactions with power dynamics, and encounters with othering pedagogy and practices (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hillard, 2015; Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow; 2010). Scholars who study Black student success from a critical lens situate Black student adjustment in the social, cultural, and racial contexts they navigate. Critical studies explore the variance in race and power systems across institutions and how those systems impact their identities (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Hersberger & D'Augelli, 1992). These studies reveal how Black scholars leverage their racial identity engaging with racialized contexts and their self-concept adjusting to college environments that were unfamiliar and sometimes harmful. Students who have stronger perceptions of racial cohesion or belonging have better socioemotional and academic adjustment outcomes especially across institution types. Research surrounding the intersections of race, gender, and power in Black student success shed light on the often-unspoken realities that exist for Black individuals and promote opportunities to create research, practice, and policies that impact the systems surrounding higher education governance and structure.

The persistence of Black scholars in higher education is also significant in the adjustment literature. Tinto (2017) expands on the concept of adjustment as retention, positing that persistence and socioemotional support impact the institution's ability to retain students. His work reimagines student retention as a motivational strategy, honing in on the institutional practices and responses needed to support students from their diverse perspective. This focus on

institutional responsibility as a strategy for Black student persistence reinforces the idea that institutional fit is a critical factor in Black student perception of adjustment and success.

Examining the responsibility of institutions in providing an affirming, supportive space for Black students, scholars proposed that institutions adopt more culturally competent ideologies around Black student success so they can inform the social inclusion and relationship building of Black scholars in higher education (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Von Roberston et al. 2005). Themes surrounding experience affirmation, relationship building with leadership and other university officials, and creating social networks of support, were really important to Black student persistence and success.

Black student adjustment has many facets that contribute to the overall success of Black students in higher education. Though there are challenges that Black scholars face throughout their academic journey, their ability to adjust is impacted by cultural, socioemotional and personal factors that vary within different institutional contexts. Black scholars consider the sociopolitical climate of the institution, the support or lack thereof an institution offers, their identity as it pertains to race in the institutional setting, and how institutional power structures and systemic policies impact their ability to persist and be successful.

Graduate Success: Matriculating into Advanced Fields

Transitioning from undergraduate to graduate studies is another pivotal moment for many Black students, indicating a deeper commitment to academic and professional advancement. Yet, this transition is often filled with unique challenges and opportunities, as Black students navigate the complexities of advanced fields. Research on graduate success provides insights into the factors that influence Black student success trajectories in higher education and beyond.

Black students transitioning to graduate programs are responsible for acclimating to their graduate environment and must leverage their developing academic identity and social capital to successfully navigate their institutions. Winkle-Wagner and McCoy (2016) negate the assumption that students should be socialized to solely exist within the established norms of graduate programs by suggesting a bidirectional socialization that increases Black students' social and cultural capital. Emphasizing the critical role of social and cultural capital, Black graduate students are successful when they have equitable access to educational resources and supportive environments throughout their graduate experience (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016). Resources such as equitable institutional policies, mentorship, and supportive networks help shape the tenure of Black students if educators and institutional stakeholders prioritize their needs and experiences.

There is an even bigger emphasis on Black scholars exercising their own agency to advocate for their needs while pursuing an advanced degree. Robinson's (2013) research on Black women navigating graduate programs, positions communication as an active strategy for scholars to use to combat oppressive experiences in their graduate program. Her research uses the voice and experiences of Black women to emphasize how they leverage their agency to inform discussions around graduate success and enduring their programs. Other scholars have also investigated the needs of Black graduates by engaging with the scholars as experts of their own experience (Borum & Walker, 2012; Cropper 2000; Robinson, 2013). Their research reveals that Black graduate scholars often feel isolated and unsupported as they acclimate to their graduate environment, but they seek support, mentorship, and community as strategies to matriculate and feel successful.

Black Graduate Student Transition

As scholars have investigated student transition from undergraduate to graduate studies, the focus has expanded to understand all aspects of transition for Black students across the academic landscape, especially in graduate programs. Researchers have explored the experiences of Black scholars at various institutions and compared their success across different types of institutions. However, there is an opportunity for further research on the factors that contribute to Black graduates' success when they choose different collegiate environments for graduate school. The literature holds significant potential, particularly in understanding the experiences of Black scholars transitioning from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for graduate education.

The existing literature speaks to the impact HBCUs have had on the transitional success of Black students who choose to attend a PWI for graduate school. Black students that graduate from HBCUs and transition to PWIs for graduate school do experience success academically and professionally but often times experience challenges related to their cultural adjustment and social integration (Harper, 2017; Nettles & Millet, 2006). While some HBCU graduates were well-prepared for the rigors of graduate education and perform comparably to their peers from other institutions, other graduates encountered difficulty navigating unfamiliar academic environments, different teaching and curriculum styles, and fewer support systems compared to what they received at HBCUs. The research underlines the importance of providing targeted support and resources to facilitate a smooth transition for HBCU graduates entering PWI graduate programs (Nettles & Millet, 2006). Black students moving into the PWI space also negotiated their racial and cultural identities as to navigate complex identity dynamics at their institutions (Harper, 2017). Students experienced issues with acclimation or assimilation if they

were not given access to institutional culture, explicit knowledge structures and processes, and implicit expectations that are necessary to be successful in their graduate environments. Feeling the pressure to conform or adhere to dominant norms and expectations impacted their sense of belonging and ultimately their well-being. This research provides opportunities to further investigate Black students experience within PWI landscapes to address the needs and challenges of Black students during the transition process.

Research on Black students who transitioned to PWI graduate programs also suggests that students may face retention and graduation challenges similar to those experienced by Black students at PWIs (Maton, Wimms, Grant, Wittig, Rogers, Vasquez, & McDougall Weise, 2011). Institutional factors such as financial constraints, the sociopolitical climate, and the lack of guidance and mentorship impacted their ability to persist and complete graduate programs at the same rate as their counterparts. Despite some of these retention and graduation challenges, Black students who do graduate from PWIs with an advanced degree, typically go on to successful careers in academia, industry, and other sectors (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Scholars who maintained their connections with supportive networks, such as alumni associations, mentors, and peers from their HBCU alma maters, found more success in their graduate program (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Perna et al., 2010). These networks provided emotional support, academic guidance, and networking opportunities that helped student navigate the challenges of graduate education. Both of their experiences at HBCUs and PWIs contributed to their professional development, resilience, and navigational capital in diverse environments.

Overall, the literature reveals that Black students may encounter cultural and navigational challenges that impact their tenure in graduate programs at PWIs, but they also possess certain strengths, resilience, and support networks from their HBCU experience that aid in their ability

to be successful and overcome those challenges. Continued research is necessary to better understand what other factors contribute to their success in PWI environments to ensure they have equitable access to graduate education and career opportunities.

The Afrocentric Perspective

Having examined the foundational and contemporary research on student success, it is essential to explore frameworks that specifically address the unique experiences and challenges of Black students. The Afrocentric Perspective provides an interpretive lens through which the cultural, historical, and social contexts of Black students are centered and valued. This perspective emphasizes the importance of cultural identity and affirmation in fostering educational environments where Black students can thrive. This section of the literature will introduce the Afrocentric perspective, explore its tenets and central themes, as well as situate student success within an Afrocentric lens to guide this study. By understanding and integrating Afrocentric principles, educators and researchers can develop more effective strategies to support the holistic success of Black scholars.

Historical Overview

The Afrocentric perspective, also known as Afrocentricity, is a philosophical and theoretical approach that prioritizes the study of African phenomena from an African worldview and value system (Asante, 1980; Milofsky & Rinke, 2006). Developed by scholars like Molefi Kete Asante, Maulana Karenga, and others, Afrocentricity aims to promote and prioritize the perspectives, values, and experiences of individuals across the African diaspora in various academic disciplines. The Afrocentric perspective counteracts the Eurocentric bias that has dominated Western academia and intellectual discourse by asserting that knowledge production in the Western world has been heavily shaped by European cultural perspectives. These

perspectives have often marginalized and distorted the experiences and contributions of Africans and individuals of African descent. Thus, the Afrocentric perspective aims to correct historical distortions and misrepresentations of African people and cultures often found in Eurocentric narratives and is used as a tool of empowerment for African people and descents as liberation from oppressive systems and ideologies. While the Afrocentric perspectives face criticisms regarding its promotion of essentialism and narrow focus on African perspectives, proponents argue that this corrective lens is necessary to address the longstanding biases of Eurocentric thought and provide valuable insights to understanding the needs, experiences, and contributions of African and African diasporic people (Asante, 1998; Asante, 2007). Essentially, the Afrocentric perspective seeks to enrich the academic discourse surrounding individuals of African descent by centering their needs and contributions. Exploring Black individuals experience more closely provides an understanding of the challenges and barriers they face within larger societal constructs while allowing them to own their identity and agency in how they understand the world.

Three key principles of the Afrocentric perspective are centering the agency, values, and experiences of African people in research, teaching, and practice (Mazama, 2001; Asante, 1998, 2007). Afrocentricity emphasizes the importance of agency for African people, situating them in self-determination and self-reliant orientations as the shapers of their own destinies, rather than being passive recipients of external influences. The Afrocentric perspective also seeks to understand and appreciate African values and worldviews which may differ from Western perspectives but in turn highlights the experiences and needs of African people. Afrocentricity also places African people at the center of analysis, centering their histories, cultures, and experiences rather than treating them as peripheral or marginal.

Afrocentric Perspective and Student Success

The Afrocentric perspective situates student success within a broader context that acknowledges the unique experiences, histories, and cultural backgrounds of people of African descent. In the landscape of education, various approaches shape how we understand and pursue student success. The Afrocentric perspective stands as a compelling framework that offers unique insights into achievement, empowerment, and holistic growth of the students of African descent. At its core, Afrocentrism challenges conventional paradigms seeking to reclaim narratives, celebrate heritage, and empower individuals by centering African experiences in the discourse on education. It centers the principle of cultural affirmation, asserting the importance of acknowledging and valuing diverse identities, histories, and lived experiences. It also prioritizes community engagement as a cornerstone of student success, offering a holistic approach to education that extends beyond the classroom and embraces the interconnectedness of individuals with their communities. By integrating African perspectives, knowledge systems, and cultural practices into education research, scholars foster a sense of belonging, pride, and agency among learners. Thus, Afrocentricity serves as a catalyst for academic engagement, personal development, and community empowerment, repositioning the African contributions in traditional educational frameworks that have been erased and marginalized within Eurocentric paradigms.

Afrocentric Perspective Guiding Black Graduate Success

In this study, the Afrocentric perspective is utilized to advance educational research by centralizing and recognizing the agency, values, and experiences of Black students within academia. Increasing African centrality in educational research influences educators to adopt

anti-deficit approaches to teaching and engaging Black students. Theorists infuse cultural identity and the collective conscious into anti-deficit research to encourage strength-based, solution-focused results in academic literature (Asante, 1980; Akbar, 1984; Schiele, 1997).

The Afrocentric perspective encourages researchers to center the experiences of marginalized people in educational research, especially Black individuals. The aim is to inform practice that affects social change and address educational injustices found in today's educational climate. By asserting Black individuals as agents in their own development, researchers recognize marginalized individuals as experts in their environment and producers of valid knowledge through their lived experiences. Adopting an anti-deficit approach to explore educational research provides an opportunity to support the identity development and nuance realities that Black students encounter in academic spaces. It also reinforces the opportunity for Black students to align with a positive cultural identity and exercise their agency as they navigate various postsecondary landscapes. Including Black narratives of success provide opportunities for scholars to actively participate in understanding success and exercising agency to solve educational dilemmas.

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Building on the Afrocentric Perspective, it is necessary to adopt frameworks that not only recognize but actively counteract the challenges, barriers, and deficits often imposed on Black students. The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework shifts the narrative from a focus on the perceived deficiencies of Black students to one that highlights their strength, resilience, and achievement. This framework provides a strengths-based approach to understanding and promoting the success of Black students by examining the positive factors that contribute to their academic and personal growth. By implementing an Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework,

researchers and practitioners can better support Black students in overcoming challenges and achieving excellence in their educational journeys.

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) is ontologically rooted in relativism meaning individuals understand the world through their historical, social, and cultural contexts (Crotty, 1998; Harper, 2007). ADAF recognizes Black individuals' lived experiences as integral to understanding their academic salience (Harper, 2009). The perceived reality of Black students is that they are underachieving, underprepared, and at-risk. Harper shifts this misconception by studying students who have been able to achieve and matriculate in college. Harper (2012) explores the epistemic crisis surrounding the educational attainment gaps for Black male students. To address this dilemma, Harper (2012) posits that knowledge must be regarded as valid only by exploring the realities of students who achieve and that researchers interested in Black male student success have much to learn from successful Black male students (Harper, 2012). Researchers must actively work to incorporate Black narratives into research through various research methodologies. Providing successful experiences from individuals in higher education could provide a perspective shift towards Black students being regarded as agents of success rather than outliers. Thus, the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework acts as a counterbalance to the one-sided emphasis of Black student performance (Harper, 2012).

ADAF also focuses on Black students' resilience by promoting solution-focused, person-centered scientific inquiry. Harper recognized that deficit-oriented literature focuses primarily on the academic challenges rather than the academic potential of Black students in educational settings (Harper, 2007). The presentation of Black students as underachievers reinforces racial disparities presented in academic research such as achievement or persistence. By excluding the realities of Black students in research and reiterating their failures rather than acknowledging

their accomplishments, it diminishes the agency of the student. The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework centralizes Black students in research, providing opportunities to support and engage Black students in practice (Harper, 2009, 2012).

As ADAF is a new theoretical framework, the academic literature is still in the exploratory phase and spans multiple disciplines. Exploring research on ADAF illuminates how the framework was conceptualized and its purpose for centralizing Black experiences in academia. Building this connection will provide the foundation for the utilization of ADAF to support Black students in higher education. Adopted from the National Black Male College Achievement Study, researcher Shaun R. Harper developed the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework to address the oversaturation of deficit-oriented research. Designed to combat racial stereotypes and perceptions of Black male college students, ADAF explores three constructs: resilience to obstacles/challenges, campus culture, and achievement/success (Harper, 2005, 2010, 2012). Through question reframing, Harper (2012) conducted an interview-based qualitative study of 219 achieving Black male undergrads at 42 colleges and universities. The interview questions were redesigned to inquire about factors that contributed to the achievement and persistence of Black male students in higher education. The findings were coded into six themes: 1) getting to college, 2) choosing colleges, 3) paying for college, 4) transitioning to college, 5) matters of engagement, and 6) responding productively to racism. This study revealed that students used questioning techniques to address student/teacher misconceptions and participated in affirming student activities/organizations to succeed in higher education.

Providing a positive constitution for research questions, ADAF recognizes students as experts of their experiences and addresses their needs. This framework orients the researcher as an investigator of the successes of prevailing students to identify best practices in academia and

integrate efficient supportive services. While the development of ADAF primarily focuses on the experiences of Black male college students, the framework can be adapted to centralize the experiences of Black students across research, policy, and practice. An exploratory search of ADAF in education research reveals a seamless integration of anti-deficit orientations across academic contexts and disciplines. The literature search reveals studies that address Eurocentric educational practices that negatively impact marginalized students experience in academia through the promotion of student, teacher, and administrative representation in educational research settings (Byars-Winston, 2014; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016; Thoman, Brown, Mason, Harmsen, & Smith, 2015; Whittaker & Montgomery, 2015; Wood & Harris, 2015). These scholars expound on opportunities to support and engage with students through asset-based approaches within faculty-student relationships, socialization processes, and co-curricular experiences. Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework provides practical solutions that acknowledge the voice of marginalized students in education while promoting solutions that have contributed to the success of various Black student populations.

Summary

The evolution of student success research reflects a complex exploration of academic, sociocultural, and emotional factors that contribute to the well-being and achievement of learners. From the early contributions of Dewey and Vygotsky to contemporary studies in Black student success, the field has continually evolved to address the changing educational landscapes and the needs of the students. The focus on equity and inclusion, particularly in the context of Black student success, highlights the ongoing challenges and opportunities within educational research to center the values, experiences, and voices of Black scholars as they navigate the complex realities that exist in higher education.

The exploration of Black student success in navigating PWI graduate programs, especially from the perspective of HBCU graduates is a critical area of inquiry. This research seeks to address the complexities and challenges that Black HBCU graduates encounter transitioning to PWIs for advanced degrees by introducing counternarratives of success from Black scholars who successfully graduated from both institutions. The literature highlights that while these graduates face unique hurdles related to cultural adjustment, social integration, and limited navigational capital, they bring strong academic backgrounds, resilience, and motivation to their academic environment. This research will further explore the success orientations that Black graduates enact to be successful in their program and inform educational stakeholders on ways to support Black graduates that may extend beyond the traditional support frameworks that exist or do not exist at different institutions. By focusing on their narratives and leveraging theoretical frameworks that center their perspectives, this research highlights the resilience and agency of Black HBCU graduates while underscoring the importance of institutional commitment to their success in diverse educational settings.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I elaborate on the methodology used to explore the experiences of HBCU graduates in graduate programs at predominantly White institutions (PWI). I sought to understand how Black graduates defined success while seeking a graduate degree and how their previous academic experiences contributed to their matriculation at a PWI. Success in this research context was not only defined by the student's ability to graduate but how they defined success while navigating their respective program and institution (Shavers & Moore, 2014; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018). Interested in making meaning of the Black graduate's experience, this study employed a qualitative approach that situated the graduate as the expert of their experience through narrative inquiry and oral storytelling (Josselson, 2013). This chapter outlines my approach to research design, data collection, and data analysis to address the research question that guided this inquiry:

How did Black HBCU graduates successfully navigate graduate programs at PWIs?

- a. How did Black graduates' beginning educational experiences shape their identity around success and higher education?
- b. How did Black graduates' HBCU experiences situate them in success preparing for graduate school?
- c. How did Black graduates enact success strategies navigating their PWI graduate program?

This study aimed to understand how Black HBCU graduates successfully navigated graduate programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (Harper, 2007) was used to develop the research question from a strengths-based perspective diverging from prominent narratives in dominant literature surrounding deficits or disparities in Black student success throughout graduate education.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed to understand the successful experiences of Black HBCU graduates as they navigated graduate programs at PWIs. Using narrative inquiry, the graduates shared their stories as narrators, providing personal and intimate perspectives on success in education that would help me to make meaning of their experiences. This section discusses the research design developed to complete this study and highlights my reflexive position as a researcher who has proximity to the graduates through shared identities.

Afrocentric Constructivism

To fully understand how the study was designed, it is first essential to understand the worldviews that influenced the direction of this research and the goal for the research aims. Social constructivism assumes that individuals understand their world by making meaning through subjective experiences with others and their environment (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998). Subscribing to the primary belief that individuals make sense of the world as participants in meaning-making, their understanding of the world is a by-product of their interaction with the environment and others around them. Thus, understanding is constructed and should be examined from a perspective that situates the individual within the context of the phenomenon at that time.

For Black individuals, different principles and values influence how they interact with the world to make meaning. The Afrocentric perspective centers the interests and perspectives of Black people as a collective and as individuals (Asante, 1980; Bakari, 1997; Milofsky & Rinke, 2006). I positioned myself in an Afrocentric constructivist worldview to better understand how the graduates came to know success in their graduate programs through their own experience. I also used the Afrocentric worldview as a tool to shape how I represented the experiences of Black graduates in my research.

Qualitative Inquiry

This study was guided by qualitative inquiry which has been used to gather rich, detailed narratives that arise from the graduates' stories. One key element of qualitative inquiry is the work of understanding the natural, authentic experiences of participants as they occur. This means that qualitative researchers study things in natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For this study, I inquired about the lived realities the graduates brought to the study in addition to their reaction to the changing external and environmental factors that shaped their experience in graduate school. This kind of inquiry prompted an exploration of how they engaged and reflected on their own experience and how they developed success identities based on their interactions and reflections throughout their academic journey. Thus, I explored Black HBCU graduates experiences with success navigating their PWI graduate programs from a qualitative lens. To understand this phenomenon, I used narrative inquiry as a form of qualitative research to illuminate the lived realities participants shared with me and make sense of their own understanding of success through our conversations.

Narrative Inquiry

In this study, I employed an exploratory narrative inquiry design to describe and interpret graduates' experiences from their perspective. Coined by Clandinin and Connelly in 1990, narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on studying and understanding the lived experiences and realities of individuals through the stories they tell. Their work developing the concept of narrative inquiry was influenced by other academic discourses surrounding education philosophies, understanding of narrative analysis, and literary approaches to narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2007). The focus

of narrative inquiry is a collaboration between researcher and participants where stories are shared via interviews, journals, or observations. Thus, the researcher and the participant combine the views of their lived experiences into a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The collaborative narrative emphasis for this study reflects the stories shared by the graduates and the lived experiences I brought to this study that shaped how I synthesized and analyzed the data.

I also used the narrative inquiry approach to center the voice of the graduates and situate myself as an instrument for recollection, chronicling the graduates' experience to the extent they understand what was expressed (Bhattacharya, 2016). My lived experiences and realities served as a premise for how I made meaning of the narratives privileged to me by the graduates. Given that the researcher is the primary instrument for recalling and making sense of the participant's accounts of their experiences, it was necessary to understand what realities and experiences I brought to this study to account for proximity and closeness to the Black graduates within this study.

Reflexivity

When accounting for bias and the experiences that the researcher brings to research, scholars believe that the role of the researcher is to reflect on their experiences and minimize the impact their experiences have on the research process (Patton, 2002). This purview suggests that the researcher can limit their presence in the research by taking an objective position but research in and of itself is the creation of knowledge from the researcher's understanding of the subject. Therefore, the research cannot be objective or distant from the researcher. However, the researcher should exhibit critical subjectivity so that these experiences do not affect the research aims. *Critical subjectivity* is defined as “a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our

primary experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be swept away and overwhelmed by it; rather, we raise it to consciousness and use it as a part of the inquiry process" (Maxwell, 2005, p.225). Adopting Dillard's (2000) view that the researcher-participant relationship should move from detachment to responsibility, I will use reflexivity to speak to my level of responsibility in this research process and to provide readers with a focus for understanding how this study came to be. In the spirit of reflexivity and understanding the experiences that shape my worldview, research, and purpose as a researcher, I bring my lived realities and identities as a first-generation, educated, Black woman in academia to this research space. I am an alumna of two HBCUs: Alabama State University, a public, student-centered institution for undergrad, and Clark Atlanta University, a private, Methodist, historically Black research university for my graduate studies. I am attending a PWI: Auburn University, a public land-grant research university, for my doctorate and have received my master's from the institution while pursuing my terminal degree. My understanding and experience navigating a PWI shaped how I engaged with my research topic and was one of the primary motivations for inquiring about Black graduates' experience in graduate education across institution types.

I have assumed many roles in higher education across my academic and professional experience, focusing on student curricular and professional development. At my undergrad institution, I served as an academic advisor/mentor to many students, including student-athletes, to help them navigate their experiences at the university. My commitment to student engagement and success was exemplified by my participation in the Student Government Association (SGA), my leadership and service as a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated, a Black Greek Lettered Organization (BGLO), participation in community service and mentoring organizations, and my service to the professional organizations within my degree program. My

graduate experience provided a more tailored lens for student support as graduate students needed different levels of engagement with the curriculum and resources that balanced life as a scholar and a practitioner in most cases. Graduate students relied heavily on the support of graduate faculty and each other to apply the skills acquired to the workplace setting. I served as a Dean's Fellow to inform policies and practices that shape graduate education as a voice for fellow students. These experiences built the foundation of my academic integrity and identity as a scholar.

Attending Auburn University as a doctoral student during the height of COVID-19, I held a graduate assistantship within the Career Center, served on many graduate student committees for the department, college, and the institution, worked with the Dean of the Graduate School, the President of the University, served the institution as an executive board member of the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association (BGPSA), and eventually obtained a full-time position supporting the needs of underserved and underrepresented student populations at the university. While balancing these roles and pursuing my degree, I recognized the importance of creating support networks and initiating relationships with my colleagues as necessary for my success in the program. Some situations arose navigating the program as a first-generation student that other students could identify with. However, there was a different experience among Black graduate students that helped us find community through our lived experiences and realities. Some students felt invisible, dismissed, silenced, and rejected, while others felt respected, supported, appreciated, and accepted.

One important distinction that arose when discussing tenure in our programs and how we chose to navigate the space was how students who graduated from an HBCU spoke about their strategy for graduating versus those who had not. Some students suggested adapting their

identity to the program's culture to keep a low profile and adhere to the recommendations of faculty even if they felt the recommendations were not beneficial to their success. Students who graduated from an HBCU showed more resistance to the “just get it done” mentality and spoke to occupying their academic space more authentically while advocating for their needs to receive the necessary accommodations to support their success. Their experience in their program differed from their counterparts as some students held prominent roles and positions within their departments. These various encounters and perspectives prompted further exploration of my strategy to navigate this space, as my experience was more salient than some of the experiences of other students. I sought to understand how the experiences of Black graduates who attended HBCUs shaped how they engaged with their respective institutions and whether these experiences translated across institution types and locations. I acknowledged that all HBCU experiences do not automatically influence the success of Black scholars in graduate programs at PWIs and that some individuals who have graduated from PWIs do not feel that they have successfully navigated their institution, but I wanted to learn more about the ways HBCUs attributed to the success narratives of Black graduates.

Given my backgrounds and experiences, I approached this research study with great intentionality and purpose. I leveraged my proximity to the participants as an outsider within (Collins, 1986) and chose an active voice throughout the research process. I used rhetoric that situated the participants as experts and authors of their experience and asked questions that reflected the values, interests, and beliefs of the Black community. I also explored new ways to approach research in the field of education by presenting the successful narratives of Black graduates as a center for exploration without othering them as outliers or exceptions to prominent student success narratives. Further emphasizing rhetoric, I made intentional choices surrounding

the language and words used in the research to provide more readers with access to this scholarship. My personal aims for this research were to provide space for Black graduates to share their stories as they experienced them while adding success-oriented literature to education research so that Black individuals could see themselves reflected in the literature as champions and successful agents in with the ability to pursue and complete graduate education.

Methods

Selection Criteria

To understand how Black HBCU graduates successfully navigated PWI graduate programs, I used purposive sampling to identify graduates to interview about their experiences. The selection criteria for participation were individuals who 1) identified as Black or of African descent, 2) graduated from a historically Black college or university, and 3) graduated with an advanced degree from a predominantly white institution. Using the Afrocentric perspective, the first sampling criteria provided opportunity for individuals to identify as Black or of African descent to reflect the complexity and richness of the collective identities among Black Americans in the United States.

The recruitment materials for this study included a preliminary demographic survey, a flyer, and an email protocol. A preliminary demographic survey was developed in Qualtrics to serve as a screening tool to determine participant eligibility for the study. Graduates were provided with the study information including a consent form following IRB protocols to show that the study was approved. At the end, all graduates were asked to provide their email to confirm they were interested in completing a 45–60-minute interview. Selected graduates were notified via email with an interview date and time.

Recruitment

Graduates were recruited via email and flyers on any relevant social media platforms such as GroupMe, Facebook, and Instagram. While I had proximity to the graduates through our shared identities, I still had to navigate an outsider-within phenomenon (Collins, 1986) because I brought different experiences and understandings to this research. The graduates provided insight on their diverse backgrounds, institutions, and overall motivations for pursuing a graduate degree that were unique to their experience and shaped their ideas about success. I leveraged my access to spaces for Black academics, such as GroupMe, Discord, Twitter, and Instagram, to share the recruitment flyer and used snowballing strategies to share outside of my immediate network. I also had local access and proximity to Black academics at Auburn University through the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association (BGPSA), Graduate Student Council (GSC), and the Graduate School, which I used to share my recruitment materials as well. To expand my reach to HBCU graduates who could be potential participants, I used my relationship with institutional gatekeepers (Creswell, 2009) at various HBCU institutions to gain access to potential participants for my study.

The call for participants garnered 108 survey responses and after cleaning the survey data, 47 respondents were eligible to participate in the study. Clandinin (2013) recommended that narrative inquirers remain open to adjusting the number of participants based on the emerging narratives and the level of detail required for the study. I originally wanted to capture the range of success across various academic landscapes, so I identified 14 scholars to interview. Factors that influenced my decision for the 14 were age, where they were born, gender, institution type, degree type, graduation date, and first-generation status.

Demographic Survey

A demographic survey was created to ensure the graduates meet the selection criteria necessary to understand the research question. Using Afrocentricity as a theoretical lens for this study meant that the research design and strategies should incorporate the complexity of experiences among individuals of the African Diaspora (Bakari, 1997; Asante, 1980). The Afrocentric theory posited that Black individuals are naturally collectivistic, relying on their connection to each other and their ancestors to shape their identity and how they interact with the world. When selecting participants, the complexity of significant influences on the graduate's identity is considered. Individuals who self-identify as Black may use other identifiers that speak to their roots and cultural identity. Thus, the demographic survey captured background information on the graduates' age, identity, additional ethnic or cultural identities, first-generation status, institution information, age at graduation from their PWI, and general interest and availability in participating in an interview (Appendix A).

Exploring the demographic background of the selected graduates, their age ranged from 22 to 55 and they shared experiences growing up in 9 different states with majority of the states located in the South. All graduates identified as Black with at least one graduate identifying as Nigerian. There were 9 female graduates, and 5 male graduates selected for this study that represented 11 HBCUs and 16 PWIs. Of the 11 HBCUs represented, 5 were private institutions and 6 were public institutions with 3 being land-grants. Three of the HBCUs had a high-research designation, with 2 being R2 schools and 1 being an R1 institution. Of the 16 PWIs represented, 9 were public institutions and 7 were private institutions with 3 being land-grants. Six of the PWIs had a high-research designation with 2 being an R1 institution. Between the 27 institutions, the graduates held 13 bachelor's degrees, 13 master's degrees, and 9 doctoral degrees in various

academic disciplines. Graduation dates for the graduates ranged from 1989 to 2022 and 5 of the graduates identified as a first-generation college student.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected through qualitative interviewing of the research participants. I conducted 14 qualitative interviews to understand how graduates came to perceive success navigating their graduate program. A semi-structured interview protocol was adapted to capture the richness and depth of experiences the graduates' experiences (Josselson, 2013). The protocol included 11-13 questions surrounding the graduates' educational background, college influences, HBCU experiences, graduate school influences, and PWI experiences.

Interview Method

A semi-structured interview method was used to guide the interview's direction as the graduates shared their stories (Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews allow for adaptations to the open-ended questions bounded by the research question, which helps capture the richness and depth of the graduate's experiences (Josselson, 2013). Using Afrocentricity to develop the protocol, I asked the graduates questions pertaining to their values and experiences that influenced their success in their graduate program. The questions incorporated elements specific to central tenets of the Black community, including identity, spirituality, and community (Asante, 1998). The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) was also used as a strengths-based framing technique that helped focus the questions on what worked rather than what went wrong. The interview protocol focused on main areas of educational success for Black graduates: K-12, HBCUs, and PWIs.

Interview Procedures

The interviews took place via Zoom from January 22, 2024, to February 16, 2024, and lasted approximately 50 to 75 minutes. Each interview began with introductions and an overview of the study. I confirmed the graduate still desired to participate in the study and made sure they understood that the study was voluntary. The informed consent and study information was presented to all graduates during the recruitment process in the demographic survey that was distributed. Before the interview began, I confirmed that all consent forms had been completed and assured the graduates that their information would remain confidential. They were also given the opportunity to use a pseudonym or their real name before beginning the interview. Since some of the graduates chose to use a pseudonym, all graduates were given a pseudonym to protect their identity and provide uniform processes for data storage and use. I gave each graduate the opportunity to ask questions after I informed them that the interview will be recorded to ensure reporting accuracy. Graduates were also notified that I enabled the AI tool, Meeting Summary, to assist with memoing and headnote generation. I communicated that the Zoom interview and meeting summary were captured to minimize the chance of data loss and allowed me to engage more fully with them in the interview. Recognizing that the graduates bring different experiences and perspectives to this research study, I built rapport with them by asking preliminary questions that established a connection for open dialogue and communication. Introductory dialogue included conversations surrounding check-ins, gratefulness for participating in the interview, and making sure they were informed and comfortable with the research protocols for the interview. Interview questions were then asked and organized based on the responses that each graduate provided as the interview progressed.

The data from the audio transcripts were transcribed and prepared for coding in ATLAS.ti version 24.

Data Quality

The quality of qualitative research is based on the determination that the data is accurately represented from the standpoint of the researcher, participant, and reader (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide four criteria for determining quality in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Tracy (2010) and Creswell (2009) regard credibility as the data's trustworthiness or authenticity. Thus, credible research is research that the readers feel trustworthy enough to act on and make decisions in line with (Tracy, 2010). For this study, member-checking and multivocality were used to establish credibility. Member checks ensured the study's credibility by allowing the graduates to check the data for accuracy. The interview transcripts were distributed to the graduates to confirm the data was accurate, extend or elaborate on their perspective surrounding a certain situation, or correct any misunderstanding that occurred during the transcription process. Multivocality brings multiple voices to qualitative research so that there is variety in the data collected. Multivocality includes using rich, thick descriptions to illuminate the place and time for the readers. Aligning with the aims of centralizing the voice of Black graduates, graduates from different ages, backgrounds, programs, and institutions were asked to participate in the study. They were able to self-disclose any additional ethnicities or identities that they associated within their Blackness. Graduates were also asked if there was anything they wanted to provide that could help enhance my understanding of their engagement with success within the higher education sphere.

While quantitative research focuses on the generalizability of findings within the study, qualitative research seeks opportunities to transfer the outcomes of the findings to different contexts and situations. Thus, Transferability refers to showing that the findings are applicable in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided details on the background and experiences graduates brought to the study so that the reader can determine if the findings could be applied to other settings. Providing context surrounding the graduate's background, including institution types, degree programs, degree type, and graduation date, will improve the reader's understanding of the study.

Confirmability addresses the degree of neutrality in the study to the extent that the study's findings is shaped by the graduate, not the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I did not assume a position of distance from the graduates, yet I created measures to understand my reflexive position and the experiences I brought to the research process. Reflexivity was used throughout the data collection and analysis process to maintain the confirmability of the findings. By continually reflecting on my experiences that could influence how the findings are interpreted, I was able to identify and expound on my proximity to the graduates while leveraging that proximity to represent their stories as authentically and intentionally as possible. For example, any colloquial phrases or language choices used by the graduates were maintained and situated in the appropriate context within the findings section.

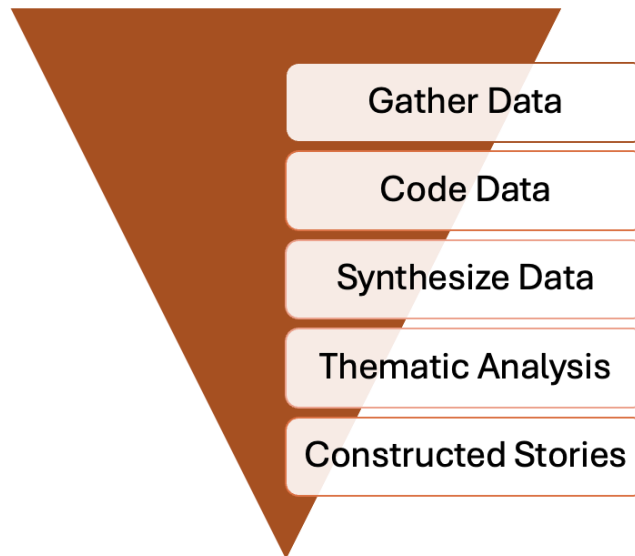
To account for the dependability of the study, I assessed the consistency of the findings and whether the findings could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One method of ensuring dependability is providing an audit trail for other researchers. An audit trail provides detailed descriptions of the steps taken through the research process, including variations in themes and

protocols. Making the research design and methodology transparent to readers strengthens the study's dependability. Concurrently, graduates' identities were masked during the initial round of coding to minimize bias in emerging themes and patterns and then was incorporate for a more in-depth analysis of how the graduates experience was unique and tailored to their view of success.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis must be a simultaneous process in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative data analysis calls for classifying information by the properties that characterize it, whether it is themes or patterns. Thematic analysis was thus an analytical approach used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting to derive those patterns or themes within the narrative data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thematic analysis provided a systematic way to analyze and interpret narratives – gathered the narrative data, coded the data, synthesized the data into categories, developed final themes that capture significant meanings and patterns within the narratives, and unified the themes with narrative snapshots that provided deeper understanding of the lived experiences and meanings of the participants (Riessman, 2008). Preserving the richness and uniqueness of each individual's story, thematic analysis allowed the researcher to explore both the particularities and shared experiences of each narrative as well as the perspectives that emerged from the collective narratives (Kim, 2016). The steps for data analysis are illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 1.1 Data Analysis Process



Recent technological advancement has introduced artificial intelligence (AI) software that could potentially assist with open-source coding for research purposes (Marshall & Naff, in press). I used AI to capture the meeting summary during Zoom interviews and to transcribe the first iteration of the audio transcripts on Rev. The AI transcription service was not able to situate the meaning of some phrases and contexts that were innate or implied within the conversations with each graduate. After the interview transcripts were ready in Rev, I reviewed and revised the transcripts to capture the dialectal and colloquial interactions I had with the graduates to ensure the essence of Black conversation and comradery was maintained. This also allowed me to reengage with the narratives of the graduates and continue to synthesize the stories they shared. For the integrity of my data and to better understand the graduates stories, AI was not used in the coding and analysis process.

As I coded and categorized data, I analyzed data in iterative cycles using a hybrid coding schema (Saldaña, 2016) of deductive and inductive codes. The tenets of Afrocentricity provided

three deductive codes to explore within the narratives: identity, support, and community. From those primary themes, I exercised an inductive process for coding, using open coding and narrative coding to situate the deductive codes as well as create new codes as I continuously engaged with the data. Throughout several iterations of coding, I made note of emerging themes and patterns within my research journal and continued to synthesize the nuance in each graduate's narrative as well as their shared experiences that contributed to a collective idea of success. I was mindful of themes and perspectives that challenged the dominant discourse and narrative of Black graduates in academia and paid close attention to similarities or differences across the scholars' stories. This iterative, hybrid coding process shaped what themes I looked for in my findings and provided space for themes and patterns to emerge as I continued to engage with the data.

After I created the final themes, I started to construct a storied representation of the graduates' experiences through narrative analysis, seeking to illuminate the graduates' experiences through intentional literary choices and cohesion (Riessman, 2002). I originally began with a narrative outline that would explore Black graduates' experience within the PWI landscapes and intertwine their educational background and HBCU experiences into it in snapshots. As I continued to sit with the themes, I began to see success as a praxis or action graduates enacted across their educational journey that needed to be illustrated as a story of development rather than starting the story at the end with their experiences in a graduate program. Thus, the findings of this study were constructed as a narrative landscape that captured the graduates' engagement with success across their academic journey in augmented vignettes.

Summary

This study employed a qualitative research design, focusing on narrative inquiry and oral storytelling to explore the experiences of Black HBCU graduates in PWI graduate programs. Rooted in Afrocentric constructivism, the study centers the graduate as the expert of their own experiences, using semi-structured interviews to collect their detailed narratives. Fourteen interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasting 50 to 75 minutes each. Graduates were recruited through purposive sampling and snowballing strategies. Data quality was ensured through member-checking, reflexive journaling, and maintaining an audit trail of the qualitative process. Thematic analysis was employed, utilizing both deductive and inductive coding to identify patterns and themes within the data. A hybrid coding schema based on Afrocentric principles was also used to synthesize individual and collective experiences of the graduates. Final themes were presented as augmented vignettes, highlighting graduates' resilience and success strategies. This methodology chapter provides a comprehensive and culturally sensitive understanding of the graduates' academic journeys, emphasizing their agency and the support systems they leveraged.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black HBCU graduates successfully navigated PWI graduate programs. The research question focused on how the graduates developed and enacted success throughout their academic journey to succeed in the graduate environment. Choosing to prioritize the relationship between researcher and participant in this study, I illuminate our authentic conversation through the use of personal pronouns. First, I introduce the graduates by their pseudonym, capturing their area of study and universities attended to provide a frame of reference while engaging with their narratives. Then, I delve into the development of the participants' success orientation throughout their K-12, HBCU, and PWI experiences. I then extend my understanding of the graduates' success further by exploring their reflective narratives where they share lessons learned in graduate school that can be useful for Black individuals in graduate education.

Table 1.1 Participants Area of Study and Universities Attended

Name	Area of Study	Undergraduate University	Graduate University
Natasha	Fashion	Clark Atlanta University	Kent State University
Grace	Adult Education	Fayetteville State University	*UNC-Greensboro
Tammy	Medical Science	Alabama State University	University of South Florida
Jocelyn	Education	Spelman College	University of Georgia
Kevin	Higher Education	Tuskegee University	Auburn University
Tricia	Agricultural Education	*NCAT State University	Purdue University
Michelle	Math Education	Spelman College	Tufts University
Tonya	Clinical Psychology	Hampton University	Saint Louis University
Stephen	Education	Morgan State University	Baylor University
Kendra	Library Science	*NCAT State University	Drexel University Charlotte School of Law
Amber	Economics	Fort Valley State University	University of Miami
Thomas	History	Jackson State University	Georgia State University
Elijah	Higher Education	Xavier University of Louisiana	University of Mississippi
Bryce	Educational Leadership	Alabama State University	Auburn University

**North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University; University of North Carolina - Greensboro*

Asking all of the graduates about their experiences in academia led to one primary thought surrounding success – that it is an intentional, subjective, and extremely nuanced concept that must be understood from the lens of the individual who experienced it. Bryce’s description of success as “not just one word, but a process” highlights a multi-layered process that involves incremental steps toward rewards, struggles, patience, and perseverance. Success is thus situated as a process and an outcome hinting at the thoughts, intentions, and efforts that individuals partake in to understand success personally and the complexity that success brings. Within this study, graduates share their grappling with success as ideas, intentions, emotions, and behaviors. They reveal their proximity to success in various ways, some acknowledging academic salience as success while others indicate survival as a mechanism of succeeding. Their stories of success will be portrayed through a series of snapshots that show their progression in success across the continuum of their academic journey.

Finding 1: Engaging with Success Orientations as Discovery and Development in Early Educational Experiences

Understanding the factors that influence the decision to attend an HBCU is crucial to comprehending the foundation of success for Black students in higher education. The first finding delves into the narratives provided by the graduates to highlight the importance of family, mentors, and community on their K-12 progression and their college selection process.

Educational Background - K-12 Experiences

I asked graduates about their K-12 background to better understand how they developed their success orientation coming into an educational environment. Their K-12 experiences were explored to understand the potential influences and drivers of success that would ultimately impact their undergraduate and graduate experiences. Many of the graduates’ formative experiences with success started with their exposure to diverse K-12 environments. Success was

determined by how the graduates saw themselves within the K-12 environment and how they were treated based on their identity. Jocelyn reflected on her first time being in a predominantly White environment and her navigation through her feelings and identity. Jocelyn recalled feeling like an outsider in her predominantly White Catholic school, where teachers' biases made her question their authority.

But I was just always annoyed by teachers. It was always me. It was always me, me, me. It always was something. And to me, I just attributed that to being the little hood girl with red hair coming into the suburban, very close-knit community. So, that also had its own scars and wounds throughout that too. But I mean, thankfully the instruction, the material, the curriculum did its job. I breeze through Spelman.

Jocelyn's recount of her experience revealed a dissonance between the difficult time she had at her school and how the environment also prepared her to be successful. Jocelyn experienced difficulty with her teachers and adapting to the environment. Her experience as an outsider showed that she lacked access to social norms and expectations in a community where she did not fit based on her background. She mentioned that her experience came with scars, suggesting that her formative years would have a substantial impact on her academic tenure in the future. Consequently, Jocelyn acknowledged feeling that the school was successful in preparing her for collegiate level curriculum. Her ability to recognize how her educational environment contributed and limited her success reveals the complexity of the academic identity the graduates were forming at early ages. The experiences of other graduates from various academic backgrounds further illustrate the nuance between academic identity and success much like Jocelyn's story but in different ways. For instance, Thomas shared his experience relocating

into a predominantly White environment and feeling empowered in his identity as an academically salient student.

We would move about 30, 40 minutes to Cambridge, Mississippi and that's where I finished the rest of my educational career. And the things I had learned [back home] were technically what made me advanced when I made it to Cambridge. I was never in the gifted program and school became my thing. It became my way of showing my own excellence. And so that would stick with me for a while.

Thomas experienced academic excellence based on the preparation he received from his previous school. That preparation along with the support of his new school provided the opportunity for him to identify as gifted and leverage school as a means to show his academic strengths. These opportunities where he excelled and was challenged offered a different view of academic success for some graduates where they were encouraged to grow and discover who they were at school. Other graduates shared similar experiences engaging with successful academic orientations that were rooted in an amazing K-12 experience, an experience that was full of questioning, seeking identity, and finding their place in new academic environments. All of these encounters impacted the graduates' college decision and created avenues of influence and support that would ultimately lead to them attending a historically Black college or university.

The Decision to Attend an HBCU

I also asked graduates why they chose to attend a historically Black college and university. Interwoven between all of their experiences is the fact that they were accepted at their respective institution and funding was provided. While acceptance and funding are important to any student's decision to attend a university, the graduates' decision to attend HBCUs were

rooted deeper in the exposure and access to the rich culture and community HBCUs provided through their family, friends, and mentors who would guide them along the way.

Financial support in the form of scholarships and external funding played a significant role in influencing the graduates' decisions to attend HBCUs. Many shared stories of how being offered substantial financial aid packages from their chosen institutions was a deciding factor. Stephen, for example, originally dreamed of attending Purdue out-of-state because of his K-12 experience and being exposed to the university from video game advertisements. He applied and was accepted to Purdue, but his dream was put on hold when he received only a small scholarship and few loan options to attend. Stephen was not in the position to attend Purdue and was unsure of what he could afford and what other opportunities were available to him. His prospects for college would change during a campus visit to Morgan State, where they would offer him a full ride to attend the institution. Thomas would experience similar excitement about his educational prospects, sharing his commitment to Jackson State was an easy decision after they offered him a generous \$21,000 scholarship. The financial support from these HBCUs not only eased the burden of tuition and expenses but also signaled to the institutions' investment in the graduates' success.

While acceptance and funding were some influences that prompted the graduates to consider attending an HBCU, there were other pivotal and subtle influences that exposed graduates to the community-based, culturally affirming experiences that would lead them to choose an HBCU for undergraduate studies. Stories surrounding family, church members, and mentors providing access to institutional knowledge in some way helped inform the graduates' decision. For example, Grace was more inclined to attend Fayetteville State because she was not

only accepted but she sought a place that would give her a sense of home and community to be successful.

I wanted to be able to engage and just talk to a student about their experience. How are the dorms, what facilities do people like to go to, what's the food like on campus, all those important things that people should ask themselves when making a decision like that, because that's a big decision. My mother also went to Fayetteville State University, so that kind of intrigued me a little bit more in terms of me wanting to find a place that had a sense of home.

Grace elaborated on her need for connection by doing intentional research on the place she would call home for the next few years. Her desire to find a place that fit her needs and felt like home provided a sense of success through community. Community was very influential in the graduates' decision process as they believed in their success at an HBCU by being exposed to HBCU culture. Kevin reminisced on his desire to keep with the family tradition of attending Tuskegee University. Family tradition served as an anchoring point for Kevin in choosing an HBCU to attend. He centered success as continuing his family's legacy at Tuskegee.

Both of my parents graduated from Tuskegee. My sister enrolled in Tuskegee when I was in elementary school. So, it has always been a very prevalent part of [my] education... a prevalent part of my life. But I always knew I wanted to follow the family tradition.

Kevin's idea of HBCUs was formed by his family attending an HBCU and sharing their experience with him. Graduates like Grace and Kevin had family to help inform their college decision while other graduates like Amber, Jocelyn, and Bryce relied on their extended community, such as church family and mentors, to assist them. Amber specifically recalled her

high school guidance counselor who encouraged her to research colleges that would expose her to Black excellence in a different environment.

My senior year in high school, my counselor explained to me that I needed to go to a school where I could see Blacks advancing. He strongly suggested that I go to a historically Black college, and he actually strongly suggested I go to one that was not in the state of Florida. So, that's the story of how I ended up going to an HBCU.

Amber's experience getting into an HBCU was attributed to her guidance counselor offering her support in ways she did not have access to in her immediate environment. The contributions of these supportive figures and the institution led these graduates to ultimately choose to attend an HBCU. Their journey understanding success would continue with them discovering their personal and cultural identity in higher education through the community and support within their HBCU experiences.

Finding 2: Fostering Agency in Success through Academic and Cultural Support at HBCUs

The second finding examines the experiences of the graduates as they matriculated at their HBCU and how these institutions fostered their autonomy and academic success. Graduates discussed the transformative impact of HBCUs on their personal and academic identity development, while introducing cultural identity as a success orientation that helped them find their place within the institution and their surrounding community.

HBCU Experiences

I asked graduates about their experiences attending an HBCU and explored what made their experience a success. They revealed that their HBCU experience helped them discover who they were at the institution and as a part of the larger community and provided a foundation for them to grow without judgement. "Well, the thing that really, really, really worked out is nobody

cared about my past in the sense of, you just lost child. Let me teach you, lemme show you this.” The idea of coming into your own identity and being exposed to a new world spoke to Amber as she recalled her first encounter with successful Black educators and leaders at Fort Valley State College¹. This theme of exposure and identity echoed across multiple conversations with the graduates as they engaged with the different aspects of their university. Exposure was not only seeing educated faculty and staff around campus but seeing peers that looked like them that have similar interests and/or values. Their HBCU experience was a time of discovering and developing their autonomy while seeking community and learning how they fit into their HBCU. Natasha spoke to this discovery sharing her experience at Clark Atlanta and how it shaped who she was and is.

A life-changing experience. I think what people don't realize is you definitely are inserted into Black culture in so many different ways. I think Clark definitely helped me figure out who I was. I don't think if I had [of] went anywhere else, I would've ever decided to study fashion or felt like it was something that I could do. And I also think it was just an experience where I felt a part of Black history in so many different ways...it is just interesting what people have turned out to be, whether it's like a doctor, a lawyer, or business owner. It's just a great seat of Black talent.

Natasha's HBCU experience cultivated a sense of confidence and pride in her alma mater because of the talent and greatness it produced within her and within society. She took pride in discovering her passion and contributed her exposure and confidence in pursuing fashion to attending Clark Atlanta. There was this energy that Natasha projected when speaking about her institution that showed her affinity for Clark Atlanta and spoke to her success being rooted in

¹ Presently known as Fort Valley State University.

personal and cultural identity development. Her references to being “inserted into Black culture” and even being a “part of Black history” showed an evolution of her cultural identity development as she positioned herself within the identity and culture of Clark Atlanta as a history-maker. Graduates like Elijah and Tammy shared Natasha’s sentiment that the HBCU experience situated them in confidence and success. Elijah did not know the possibilities available at Xavier until he started his journey stating,

I never thought an HBCU is a place where I can go and be myself and explore the depths of my Blackness. I just went ‘cause I got [a] scholarship to go. But once I got there, I really flourished,

and Tammy marveled at the access to culture and identity transformation available at Alabama State stating, “You see all these transformations and you see something that's so different than what's portrayed on TV [and] now in social media. And you see people from everywhere, all over the world basically.” Elijah and Tammy saw success as personal and cultural identity development through their access to Black culture and Black excellence at their institution.

Another integral part of the graduates’ stories about the ways they successfully navigated their HBCU is the level of support they received to continue developing their academic identity and achieve success at their respective institutions. Each graduate identified different ways they were supported across their HBCU experience, and a few instances were prominent across our conversations: faculty support, institutional support, and unique access to the cultural capital at HBCUs.

Faculty Support

Faculty support was critical to the success of graduates because it provided grounding in their personal and academic identity and cultivated a sense of accomplishment and pride in each graduate. Graduates like Tonya leaned into the support of faculty, identifying success as the byproduct of becoming who she was within and outside of the institution.

I was spending a lot of time with my professors just because they had a cool hangout spot, but I felt very known and they cared about me and I felt so supported...I think I needed that love and support to baby step me into the real world of like, okay, now we've established that you're actually really smart. Literally, I didn't really recognize in myself, but I was like, oh, I can do this college thing.

Tonya's sentiments suggested that she struggled with feeling uncertain about her ability to be successful in college. Faculty provided her with a safe place to hang out and feel seen and heard. Her experience with faculty increased her confidence not only academically but personally as well. She spoke to her experience with faculty as a necessary soft launch into the real world that felt like guidance and care. It prompted confidence in her intellectual ability as an asset she did not recognize in herself. Faculty support greatly impacted graduates' perception of success in various ways, including their identity within the social world and community at large. Natasha reflected on the way that her HBCU showed up for all students, situated them in safety, and comforted them when the outside world did not.

We had one cafeteria when I was at Clark and our professors would come in and eat with us. For me, it was a very personable experience...And even in times of turmoil, when Trayvon Martin was killed... our president, I think canceled classes the next day because it was a very traumatic experience. And it was another protest that we went to, when a

Black male was sentenced to death and our school-chartered buses to go protest. So, it was something that you really felt like they value you as a person beyond the scope of just education.

Each of these experiences Natasha mentions connect success to her value system, elaborating on her success at Clark Atlanta as a result of the professors and staff that built intentional, authentic relationships with her. She acknowledges value as being her own individual and being supported outside of the academic space where she still had to contend with real life issues. Her recollection of the support she received by the institution and faculty when Trayvon Martin was killed speaks to sociopolitical contexts having a significant impact on graduates' academic experience. The institutional and faculty response to social and political atrocities that impact the lives of Black students provided support for Natasha that went beyond their academic responsibility or as she mentioned, "beyond the scope of education." These moments reinforced the idea that the graduates not only saw themselves as successful agents within their program and at their institution, yet they saw success in themselves as community members and cultural advocates.

Institutional Support

Many of the successes identified by the graduates incorporated holistic elements of support from their institution including programs and resources that built their academic resume and professional development. Programs like the McNair Scholars Program², Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellows Program³, and TRIO programs⁴ (Upward Bound, etc.) contributed

² A program geared towards increasing graduate degree awards for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

³ A program that provides research, mentorship, and funding to support undergraduate students interested in doctoral degrees and joining the professoriate.

⁴ Federal outreach programs that provide educational opportunities to support and motivate students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

significantly to the graduates learning and development and their understanding of academic processes such as research, grad school applications, and mentorship/networking. For example, Grace and Elijah participated in the McNair Scholars Program which helped them to learn more about the graduate process. They were able to learn more about what it takes to pursue advanced and terminal degrees while also connecting with individuals who looked like them that have successfully completed their degree. Both graduates contributed some of their interest in pursuing an advanced degree to the experiences they had as a McNair scholar. These programs provided scholars with a foundational understanding of the opportunities available to them while providing a network of scholars who could mentor and support their academic and professional growth.

While graduates found success in the programs that collaborated with their institutions, there were also internal opportunities such as student organizations that supported the success and identity development of each graduate. Many of the HBCUs offered organizations such as choir, band, service learning, etc that provided diversity in the collegiate experience for their students. Consider Bryce, for instance, who originally wanted to study law. After joining the choir at Alabama State, he pivoted to a career in music education and leadership that would lead to much success for him post-graduation.

But when I enrolled at Alabama State, my first semester I joined choir and I really liked what the choir director was doing. And so going to Alabama State that first semester really ignited my passion, like, okay, I can do this. I can see myself being a choir director full-time. I wanted to be on a collegiate level. That was my end goal at that point.

Bryce's pivot to music education after participating in choir is an example of how the organizational offerings at HBCUs provided support and success for graduates developing their

academic, cultural, and professional identity. Thomas also participated in student organizations that helped him find his passion for creative writing and advocacy. Through the connections he made with individuals in the Upward Bound program, Thomas was able to find his niche with the MADDRAMA Performance Troupe – and organization for the performing arts – and continue to develop his passion of capturing life histories, which would turn into his life’s work. This experience would eventually influence his decision to attend a PWI for graduate school and further his activism surrounding oral storytelling and life histories.

Access to Cultural Capital

The sociocultural landscape of HBCUs provided graduates with the cultural capital to understand their cultural identity and further develop their personal and academic identity. The graduates reflected on many pivotal moments throughout their academic tenure where cultural traditions at their HBCU held lasting, positive impacts on their outlook of success. Traditions such as orientation, homecoming, convocations, and other rites of passage held great significance in the lives of the graduates at their institution. For example, Stephen expressly distinguishes his HBCU experience in two ways: pre-homecoming and post-homecoming. “Yeah, I would say there were two definitive parts of the experience. It was pre – and I’ll call it pre-homecoming and post-homecoming, because homecoming specifically is the moment where everything changed.”

When Stephen first arrived at college, he was unaware of the experiences and opportunities afforded to him on campus and chose to spend time with his friends from high school who attended other local universities. His first year was spent going to class and his room, never visiting the cafeteria even once. After meeting his roommate the second semester, he started to explore his campus more, becoming a tour guide and learning the history and culture of his institution. It is through this encounter that he would be interested in experiencing

homecoming and forever changing his outlook on his time at his HBCU. Stephen's perspective of his HBCU experience changed dramatically after attending his first homecoming, prompting him to fully immerse himself in campus life and activities. He realized that he had not been making the most of his college experience and found success when he was able to experience the fullness of his HBCU and connect with other individuals on campus. He sought out all possible opportunities to experience what Morgan State had to offer and find ways to make each experience his own.

This one narrative example echoes the sentiments of many other graduates as they reflected on their HBCU experience. Their reflections hold respect and admiration for their institutions that privileged them with opportunities to find their niche, create lasting memories, and come to understand their cultural roots in ways that they had never experienced. The graduates continued to be exposed to the endless possibilities and opportunities that were available to them not only as students but as individuals who were community oriented and seeking people who shared their common interests and values.

Summary

All of the graduates' experiences at their undergraduate institutions spoke to a coming of age or awakening experience around being a college student and understanding who they were as a person and an academic, especially engaging in the cultural diversity available to them at their HBCU. They engaged with success as an identity construct as they found their position at the school and within the larger community through their interactions with faculty, mentors, and all the programs and resources the institution had to offer. Not only did they experience moments that pivoted their major interest and ultimately their career trajectory, but they experienced moments of safety and joy within their institution. They were able to see themselves as

successful agents through institutional support in difficult sociopolitical climates and through on-campus cultural traditions like homecoming that built connection and community. These experiences would have a lasting influence on the graduates' decision to pursue a graduate degree and ultimately how they would enact success to prevail in a predominantly White environment.

The Decision to Choose a PWI Graduate Program

While the graduates' HBCU experiences fostered a strong sense of personal, academic, and cultural identity, their transition to graduate school at a predominantly White institution presented new challenges and opportunities for navigating the identities they embodied. When considering graduate programs and colleges to attend, the graduates shared an array of influences that shaped their decision. They shared with me sentiments surrounding funding, degree diversification, and attending the best school for a specific career path, but two particular themes that arose from the graduates' narratives were exposure and support.

Tammy had the desire to attend medical school to be a doctor since she was little. While at Alabama State, she was afforded opportunities to participate in summer internships that focused on research and medical school careers. She spoke to gaining valuable experience and insight that would further solidify her desire to stay in the medical field.

Alabama State was best for me because it allowed me to do certain summer internships. One was a research-based internship at Morehouse School of Medicine. And there was another internship that was more geared to students that were interested in medical school. I was in the operating room with a pediatric neurosurgeon multiple times and it wasn't like an observation bay where you watch, no, you had on scrubs, and you were

standing shoulder to shoulder with the surgeon. So, I almost passed out the first time, but it put me in the forefront.

Tammy's hands on experience in the operating room was a memory she reflected on fondly and passionately. It positioned her interest in the medical field as a priority and heavily influenced her decision to pursue a medical degree. Other factors would be present that would influence her choice to pivot from a Doctor of Medicine to a Doctor of Philosophy, but she would ultimately contribute the success of her academic trajectory in medicine to the support and exposure she received from faculty and mentors at Alabama State. Michelle had similar experiences deciding on graduate school by leaning into her professor's recommendation to become a Mays Fellow and learning more about the research process. Michelle took the opportunity to participate in a program that would give her insight on grad school and see if she was interested in becoming a faculty member. The program would guide her understanding of research and the responsibilities of faculty all the while cementing her interest in pursuing her doctorate.

I had a professor who talked about a pipeline program for undergraduates who are interested in becoming faculty members. I looked into the program a little bit further to see what I would be interested in. I got connected with the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program to kind of set me up with understanding what is research and what does it even mean to be a faculty member? I think it was being in that program where I was like, okay, yes, I'm going to go to graduate school. I'm going to get my PhD.

Support from faculty and advisors was also a prominent influence on graduates' choice to pursue graduate school at different universities. Tonya's confidence in her ability to attend and succeed in graduate school stemmed from her time at a research camp recommended to her by her honors college advisor.

My honors college advisor was like, my best friend runs a research program at Stanford. I think you should go. And I spent the summer there doing research on Black kids. And I was like, oh yeah, I can totally do this PhD if I can do my research on Black kids. Just changed my trajectory.

Tonya shared that she always had a desire to continue her education after graduating from her HBCU. While she was entertaining the idea of getting a master's, her professor challenged her thinking to encourage her to think about pursuing her doctorate. As she reflected on her initial response, she conveyed a sense of shock and uncertainty about pursuing a terminal degree because it was not something she wanted or thought she could do. It was not until after her honors college advisor presented a research opportunity through his connections that Tonya was able to be exposed to doctorate level work. Even then, Tonya mentions that doing research on Black kids provided her a space of enjoyment that changed her perception of the doctorate as something that she could complete with passion and purpose. These moments of exposure and support influenced how Tonya saw herself in academia, viewed advanced degrees, and researched programs that would support her learning and development.

For Tricia, support was her mentors reaching out to her at work to present an opportunity to go back to school for free. She would get a call during her planning period that would influence her academic and career goals, ultimately leading to her completion of her doctorate at Purdue.

I was at the middle school and it's my planning period. And so, I'm working, I'm putting grades in, and one of my mentors from [North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University], he calls me and he's like, Tonya, you need to get down here to A & T...He said if you find a minute, come down here to A & T. Dr. Harper and Dr. Brooklyn are

two faculty at Purdue, they're recruiting students. They have grant money, so you'll be fully funded. They're recruiting students and even if you can't get here for their presentation, you need to get down here and have dinner with them. And I'm like, well free dinner, I'm there. Just tell them I'm coming.

While Tricia jovially reflects on the promise of free food, she spoke with a level of respect and gratitude for her mentor that he would think of her for an opportunity to attend a program that is fully funded to earn her doctorate. Her mentor not only provided her with the information about the program, but he also gave her the strategies necessary to begin building a relationship with faculty members that would eventually lead to a position as a graduate student at Purdue. He served as both a mentor to her, guiding her progression, and as a sponsor, putting her name and work into spaces she did not know existed. Her mentor would shape her tenure in the program so much that her research interest would be around mentorship, and she would become a mentor to many students along her journey as a scholar. In these instances, graduate school decisions were based on institutional actors and resources that provided a space for graduates to research and understand why they should pursue a graduate degree. Some of the graduates had never considered pursuing a graduate degree while others were not certain which path to take or even what they wanted to do career wise. The stories they shared about their graduate experience illustrated success as individuals who were not only able to get accepted into graduate programs, but were able to receive financial support, continue their academic and professional identity development, and utilize resources and support along the way.

Finding 3: Navigating PWI Graduate Programs through the Lens of HBCU Graduates

The third finding focuses on the strategies Black HBCU graduates employed to successfully navigate predominantly White institutions (PWIs) for their graduate studies. This

section highlights how graduates leveraged the skills and community support they gained from their HBCU experiences. Their narratives emphasize their ability to utilize their personal, academic, and cultural identity in graduate school as they applied HBCU-honed agency to thrive in less familiar, and often less supportive, PWI settings.

PWI Experiences

When asked about their PWI experiences, the graduates shared stories about the importance of agency in navigating the unfamiliar terrain of PWI graduate programs. “I think the biggest success I felt in grad school was getting there. I made it. I applied. I took that little stupid GRE test that I hated. I made it, and I'm here and I'm surviving.” Up until this point, graduates have been on a journey of exploration, discovering and developing their identity as successful agents through exposure and support from their faculty, mentors, family, and peers. From their K-12 experience to their acceptance into graduate school, graduates determined success by the experiences they have had with teachers, institutions, and other educational stakeholders across academic landscapes. They felt a sense of community and support that gave them a better understanding of who they were as a student, scholar, colleague, friend, and a community member. However, their experience in their respective graduate programs would prove different as they began to encounter difficulty navigating the post-baccalaureate environment with the same ease and support, they received previously.

The biggest challenge graduates faced was learning how to adapt to a new learning environment. They had to learn their program requirements, build relationships with faculty and staff, learn how to navigate the institutional culture of their graduate program, and find their identity navigating the external community surrounding the institution. For many of the

graduates, they position success as an agentic process where they initiated conversations and sought support to better acclimate to the university.

Graduates had to contend with the original ideas of success they experienced at their HBCU and transform the way they enacted success at their PWI so that they could continue to succeed or see themselves as successful in a new academic setting. Their previous success would provide graduates with opportunities to build their own support systems as it reminds them of the safety and support, they were missing in their new program. In this way, success in graduate school was illuminated as two enacted strategies: *leveraging support* and *building community*.

Leveraging Support

A very common phrase used within the Black community is “it takes a village”. The original phrase, “It takes a village to raise a child,” comes from an African proverb that means it takes an entire community of people to ensure that a child grows up healthy and safe. While every culture has its own iteration of that proverb in some way, I use the African proverb as it incorporates Afrocentric tenets into its message. The proverb centers community and connection as an important element to holistic health and well-being of the child. While there are many components that are vital to the healthy upbringing of a child, if one component is missing, it has a great impact on the development of the child.

I think having a village and having different types of support are so important. Life doesn't stop while you're in graduate school. And I think that sometimes there is advice out there that says it should, and no, life keeps going. You're still allowed to be a full person when you're doing graduate school...just find people to build your village up.

Thinking of the conversations I had with the graduates about their experiences with support in their graduate program, their village was essential to their success navigating their

graduate program and the culture of the PWI they attended. Relying on both internal and external support systems, the graduates relayed their various relationships with supportive agents as things that went well and supports they wish they had. Thus, the village model arose as a way to frame the different supports illustrated in the graduates’ narratives from a community-oriented lens.

Figure 2.1 The Village Model

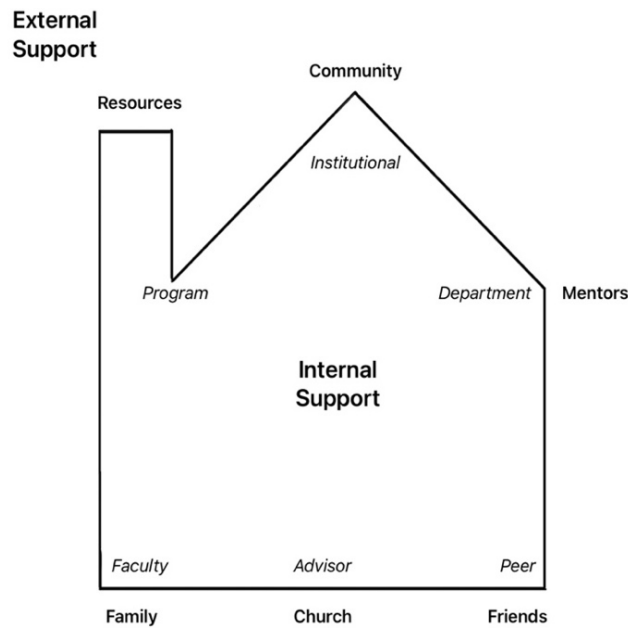


Figure 2.1 The Village Model is a visual representation of the participants experience with support throughout their graduate programs.

The village model represents 12 different supportive elements that impacted the success of the graduates across varied experiences in graduate programs at PWIs. Engaging with their collective stories, distinctions between the various components of success began to emerge as the graduates discussed success in graduate school. The six internal support categories: *institutional support, departmental support, program support, faculty support, advisor support, and peer support*, focused on the graduates’ experience with success navigating within the institution.

Institutional support referred to more macro-level of supports that their institutions offered such as accommodations and accessibility offices, career centers, writing centers, university programming, and funding. Departmental Support provided more mezzo-level support to graduates focusing on the support they received from academic departments that foster success. Support such as dissertation support, travel awards, professional development workshops, office hour with the department head, etc. were all instances of department support. Even program support was identified as a mezzo-level resource that helped graduates within their specific graduate program. This included administration, workshops on understanding program requirements, research seminars, and mentoring programs. Faculty, advisor, and peer support were all discussed as micro-level, intimate support systems that focused on the supportive relationship between the individual and the graduate that helped them continue in their program.

The six external support categories: *family support, mentor support, church (spiritual) support, friend support, resource support, and community support*, focused on the environmental influences that supported the graduates navigating the culture of the institution. These support categories were more distinct and could easily be distinguished from one another as opposed to the internal supports. In this frame of reference, resource support was defined as any resources that contributed to the graduate's success but did not come from within the university. This included funding, personal academic coaches, mental health resources, medical resources, etc. Community support in this context was defined as support from the external environment that shaped the academic journey of each graduate. Community support looked like volunteering for community service, finding an affinity group within the surrounding area of the institution, and/or being a part of an HBCU alumni chapter. Both internal and external support elements

played an essential part in how the graduate leveraged support as a success strategy and each element that was missing greatly impacted their ability to navigate their program.

The village model concept first emerged from my interview with Natasha about navigating her graduate program. Many of the conversations I had with the graduates revealed different ways they felt supported at their institution, but it was not until Natasha elaborated on her experience that this model came together to connect the thread of narratives shared by the graduates. Natasha shared the very real struggles she was having finding support at the institution and within the greater community. Because of her tenure at Clark Atlanta, she experienced a community and culture of care that extended beyond the institution, thus helping her find her identity and overall success. In this new landscape, those experiences were few and far between as she had to work hard to endure the oppressive, harmful encounters she had with faculty, colleagues, and the community. She oriented success as surviving the institution and finding ways to advocate for herself until she could finish. One part of that success that she mentioned stuck with me as I sat with all the other conversations I had with the graduates about their experience.

I think as Black women, we always find the silver lining. And for me, my department itself was very supportive. So, my department chair, my graduate coordinator, everybody was extremely supportive, but they couldn't control the outside of what was happening. Natasha relished the departments support of her efforts as they backed her use of Black feminist theory in her dissertation, especially in a state with policies against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work. They even provided support by nominating her for awards, but there was still a distinct reality where the rest of her experience in that environment was hard, and that support did not extend to the community she had to navigate. She still had to brace herself

against encounters she would have with the students she taught at the institution and members of the surrounding community where she lived. This siloed community of support highlighted the need for various supportive agents to help shape all facets of her graduate journey.

Reflecting on other conversations with the graduates, I explored other instances where they found pockets of support that shaped how they moved forward in their programs. When Tonya was in her doctoral program, she initiated and created opportunities to make change in her program around the pedagogy, treatment, and resources available for students of color. She spoke with frustration and sadness when she discussed the heavy policing of people of color on campus and the ways the program did the bare minimum to support their students of color. Her response was to create spaces and conversation to counteract these experiences she and her peers were having. She positioned herself as an advocate because she felt her voice would be heard due to the relationships she built in her program but also because of the backing from her advisor. Not just any advisor, but a Black woman who she felt could understand her plight and experience as a Black scholar in the program with a very different experience from her peers.

I think the saving grace is that my advisor was a Black woman. My advisor was a Black woman, so I knew that she had my back, and I trusted her to have my back even when I wasn't there. And so, I think, I don't know that if I wasn't under her, I would've stayed. I think had I not felt secure in my advisor being able to stand up for me, I don't think I would be nearly as outspoken in the program.

Tonya felt empowered and capable of speaking up for herself because her fear of retaliation had diminished with her advisor's support. She spoke to success as being supported and encouraged to speak up when she didn't feel like something was right. Even Tonya's thoughts surrounding

departure, if she would have continued within her program without her advisor's support, emphasizes the importance of every aspect of support in the village paradigm.

Some graduates experienced microcosms of difficulty in their programs that limited their idea of success to survival, while other graduates flourished in their graduate program at their PWIs. The graduates who flourished contributed their success to how they were able to diversify their academic portfolio and gain access to resources and support that were not available at their HBCU. Bryce, for example, shared why he felt successful in his graduate program.

My advisors were very crucial, and the administrative support...communication was there. They had more efficient processes. They laid it out for you, "you know you're about to graduate, you got to do X, Y, and Z." It wasn't a guessing game...They also were intentional with providing you with 'Here's my office hours, I will Zoom with you.'

...And so, they were really intentional in identifying that you are a working individual first of all, and we know that you're balancing work, and home, and school. And so, we want to make it accessible where you can still be successful, but we want to also meet you where you are to support you in that.

Bryce mentioned three different areas of support that he felt contributed to his success as a scholar and a professional: administrative (institutional) support, advisor support, and faculty support. The administrative processes of the university offered more guidance and efficiency for Bryce, increasing his ability to be successful and find work/life balance. Bryce spoke to still being an active father for his daughter, working full time, and pursuing an advanced degree so he greatly appreciated having efficient processes in place that help with navigating the institution. While Bryce was appreciative to his HBCU for teaching him to be resourceful, he definitely appreciated the opportunity to lean into the institutional processes that were already

provided. His gratitude extended to his advisors and professors for supporting his autonomy as a scholar and professional and for their willingness to be available to him as a resource. Their desire to meet him where he was and make sure that he was fully prepared to be successful in the program was a huge contributor to Bryce's matriculation and success in his program.

Summary

The graduates' shared experiences hint at the complex nuances in their graduate experience and the ways they understood success in spite of the learning curves and inequitable processes they endured. Success for them came from the support systems available to them that were either readily offered or had to be leveraged by the scholar. All components of the graduate process were important to the success of Black graduates, especially those who are not always afforded the navigational capital and preparation to come into graduate programs or predominantly White environments and be successful. It takes a village, a community of support and resources, to ensure the success of Black graduates as they continue to develop their academic and professional identity and learn ways to leverage support to fit their authentic and holistic needs.

Building Community: Relationships as Currency

Leveraging support systems was crucial for the graduates' success, however, some support systems were not established nor available to graduates. Thus, the graduates created avenues of success for themselves by building communities of support that could assist them in navigating their program, department, institution, and community. Tricia shared her experience learning how to be resourceful and figure things out to achieve success in her graduate program. "A&T taught me how to hustle. They taught me how to figure things out, how to figure things out on my own, how to be resourceful." Tricia had to rely on the things she learned from her

HBCU to create success in her new graduate environment. Although graduates relied on the internal and external support of their community to feel successful navigating their graduate program at a PWI, support was not always available to them at their institution. Thus, the graduates began to create their own successful environments by actively seeking supports and resources. They used their developed agency from across their educational backgrounds to maintain relationships with former faculty, colleagues, and mentors, while forming new connections through networking and mentorship. They were motivated by the prior successes they experienced at their HBCU and found ways to experience that sense of identity and community again in some way.

Take for example Grace, she struggled with being introverted and putting herself in positions to network with other colleagues and professors. She reflected on her HBCU experience and how it fostered her ability to initiate relationships both in her graduate program and currently in her career.

So, carrying that same mindset onto UNCG or to where I am right now at A&T has been good because now, I don't really feel like it's as hard to meet people when I try to put myself in a situation to connect and meet new people. It did give me a sense of knowing, of understanding where I came from, but also having people who felt like they believed in me.

Referencing the village model, Grace used her HBCU experience to build internal support communities at UNCG so that she was prepared for her graduate program. Grace beamed with a sense of pride as she recounted her ability to overcome her shyness and fear of speaking up and out. She attributed her ability to meet new people to knowing who she was and where she came from. Her success was rooted in the identity that she developed during her

undergraduate experience. Her personal growth and experiences provided the foundation she needed to build community and navigate her graduate program. That foundation continued to actualize as ways she could continue to develop her identity and find community in all environments, including her workplace. It was not just the way Grace felt about herself, but the belief others had in her to be successful. This sentiment portrays the importance of community on graduates' perception of success as well as the ways they enact success in various academic and professional settings.

Building community for the graduates also meant they could call on the people who supported them in the past to help them continue their graduate school journey. Kendra, a graduate who attended various graduate programs, spoke to her experiences navigating two different PWIs and having very different experiences. She remembered having a successful and supportive tenure acquiring her law degree but feeling less supported and encouraged in her doctoral program. Kendra reflected on the ways she leaned on the support of previous colleagues and mentors to find success enduring the program. "I've been able to contact my former colleagues, my former supervisors. I've been able to contact them and [ask] like, okay, could y'all help me with this? Or what are your thoughts about this?" Kendra was not only dealing with a program that did not support her research and career goals, but she also felt that they intentionally chose not to recognize and support the identities she brought to her program as a non-traditional, professional student who was a mother, wife, and a caregiver. She decided to reach out to the individuals who were a vital part of her experience in her other programs to create support and community for herself. By doing so, Kendra used her external support systems, such as mentors and friends, to succeed in her graduate program.

Tonya also shared her experience building community that could help offset the disorienting experience of transitioning into a new academic space. She struggled getting acclimated to the doctoral process in her program and navigating the assumptions of faculty who expected her to know what to do and how to be a doctoral student. In addition to navigating her program, COVID-19 happened during her quest for communal spaces further inciting a fear of isolation from friends and family. So, she decided to seek out community in another way.

Around the time the pandemic happened, I had been seeking out Black spaces in St. Louis and it was my New Year's resolution. I had started going to this church. I was like, oh yeah, this is great. And then the pandemic hit. I'm like, okay, now what do I do? I lost this. I was going to this Black coffee shop. I had lost this Black community that I've been seeking out. And then I found out about the Black doc students' Discord around the same time that I was frantic.”

To offset the lack of support available within the institution, Tonya sought external support in the surrounding area that would build her community network. In Tonya's effort to build community, she was able to use social media to find support in a space where Black doctoral students from across the nation gathered. Getting involved in that group helped Tonya stay connected to her community and served as a mental health outlet for the uncertainty that was the state of the world at that time.

Graduates also found success navigating their graduate programs by becoming a supportive actor or mentor for other graduate students, just like the faculty, advisors, and mentors before them. When Tricia first arrived at the institution, she sought ways to surround herself with community and serve as a resource for other students. Tricia shared her experience being a fellow in the Alliances for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP) program

with the National Science Foundation. Because of her networks with her professors, she was able to achieve academic and professional success along her academic career that would position her as a prominent scholar in her field. Those connections and relationships with faculty and mentors would support her acquiring a fully funded position in her doctoral program and lead to her obtaining a post-doctoral research position where she became a mentor for other students, undergraduate and graduate alike.

So, I was an AGEP scholar, and we had to mentor, if we were new AGEP participants, we had to mentor master students. And then you move into, if you're in your last year or you are a more senior scholar, you mentor Bridge students who are new PhD students. And so, it was always cool to see any of those students that I've mentored, graduate, get accepted into other institutions or go somewhere else or whatever it is they want to do.

Tricia identified success as a restorative practice where she gave back to others the same way her community poured into her. Not only did AGEP provide a way for her to support the tenure of other students, but it provided her with exposure and opportunities to stay connected and seek positions among the academy across the world.

For the graduates, building community was just as necessary as having supportive systems in place to be successful in their graduate program. They were able to enact the success strategies they developed to stay connected to their communities and continue to remain mentally, emotionally, and psychologically present navigating their respective graduate programs. Whether by leveraging existing support systems or forging new connections, the graduates' ability to build and sustain a strong community played a pivotal role in their success at PWIs.

Finding 4: Lessons Learned for Success

The fourth finding provides a different approach to exploring success by examining the reflective narratives of the graduates. The participants offered insight on lessons learned for future Black graduates that further reveal the graduates' engagement with success. This section synthesizes their lessons learned into three components that present a roadmap for success future Black graduate students can follow. The graduates shared valuable lessons about finding supportive environments and continuously developing their personal, academic, and cultural identities to navigate the complexities of higher education and beyond.

An Offering of Care and Wisdom from Successful Black Graduates

Drawing from their lived experiences and hard-earned wisdom, the graduates offered invaluable lessons to prospective and current Black graduate students at PWIs. Their words not only reflected their personal journeys, but also provided a roadmap for others to find success. I asked the graduates what they learned from their graduate experience so that they could share with other Black students who were interested in pursuing a graduate degree or already navigating a graduate degree program at an PWI. This question was originally intended as a pragmatic, intentional choice to support the individuals who will choose to engage with this work and want to find ways to navigate their space more authentically. It held Afrocentric underpinnings surrounding collective values and community while incorporating elements of Sankofa, the idea that to move forward we must learn from the past. However, as I listened to how the graduates engaged with their thoughts and feelings surrounding the lessons they wished to share with others, I came to understand that they engaged with success as a reflective practice of who they have come to be and what they would have done differently to exist more fully in their academic spaces.

These lessons provide a glimpse at how the graduates understood success as both a process and an outcome and how it exists along a continuum of personal and lived experiences. They offer insights that kept them grounded, pushed them to get uncomfortable, and honored the experiences that have shaped who they presently are. The goal of this section is to allow for more transparent, realistic engagements with success and gain insight to ways to successfully navigate graduate PWI programs. The insights provided by the graduates also reveal opportunities for faculty, staff, and leadership who are interested in supporting the success of Black graduate students to support them in how they enact success.

Know Yourself

The graduates offered words of care around knowing oneself and believing in who they are as they continue to grow as a scholar and professional. They shared the decisions and choices they made to continue developing successful identities so that graduates can show up in spaces that are unfamiliar and/or challenging.

“You need to know who you are. You need to know who you are, what your research goals are, and open your mouth and tell people what you need. Okay? No one is a mind reader. Have patience and have grace but open your mouth and talk to folks.”

“I really think it's important to know yourself and make time to do things that fill your cup. I think the academy is really good at asking a lot of us, and I think it's important to do self-care and even distance yourself a little bit from the work so that you can keep going and don't burn out.”

“Believe that you can do this. There will be hardships. And there's that quote about a smooth sea never made a skilled sailor. And so, there will be things that will come up in

your path that will make you more skilled in the future, but those things coming up in your path does not mean that you don't belong there.”

“Know your skillset. Know your strengths, know your weaknesses. Do not let yourself be talked into doing something that you know, yourself, you're not qualified for, or you don't have the skillset for. If you know can't do something, don't do it. Don't let them try and promote you into something. Or in graduate school, get you into a program or do stuff that you know can't do or you're not strong at it.”

“Don't change who you are. Oftentimes we feel that we must change who we are to adapt to our environments, the environment that we're in at that point, everyone has a gift.”

“Ensure you have a discernment, maybe discernment to know who is supporting you, has your best interest, and those who may be sabotaging what you think or what you may feel that's down the line for you.”

“Have faith in yourself that the same stuff that you did that got you this far, the same people who helped you, the same resources you called upon can help you get to that next step. Now at the next step you might have to find new different resources, new different people, new different ways of keeping yourself together. But like, you got this far.”

“Get out of your own head. I think a lot of times myself personally, not letting the fears, not letting the unknown scare you to a sense that you don't perform the best way that you can. And whether that's talking to friends, whether that's talking to a counselor, you have to seek help in order to be able to overcome that. So, I would say be very resilient and do not minimize your voice, be confident in what you bring to the table.”

“I would just say show up as who you are regardless of if you don't even know who that person is yet. I say that because I definitely thought I lost myself, but I still would have liked for who I was at that time to show up in those spaces.”

For some scholars, success was attributed to exercising self-awareness so that students are able to identify their needs and goals as they explore graduate education. Success was rooted in intrinsic values that help foster agency and power in students so they can continue to grow and develop positive self-orientations throughout their academic experience.

Advocate For Yourself

Graduates also offered raw, earnest sentiments about the need to advocate for yourself in graduate school. Their sentiments provide Black graduates the opportunity to engage with success throughout the graduate process so they can make the decision that best fits their need for a healthy tenure pursuing an advanced degree.

“Advocating for myself in these spaces as a Black woman advocating for yourself could mean that you're being aggressive. And it's just like you're not, you're not. And you never are. You're never given these people exactly what they deserve and what they need and what they need to hear. You're never doing that. And so, if you can find a way to do that, but also showing up as your best authentic self, I would say to do that. Showing up as your best self could be the only gift that you could give to yourself. And I would say that you should. I think that's very important.”

“Don't stop asking people for support or asking the questions or going to multiple people for the advice. Don't stop at the first no because I think that there are opportunities beyond that first no.”

“Don't go, honestly don't. The department can value your research all day long if the university isn't accepting of people who look like you, if the community isn't accepting because you're going to be living there for two or 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, how many years it takes you to get through. It's not a healthy space.”

“Don't ever stop. If you want to go to graduate school, if you know you want to go to pharmacy school, if you know you want to go to PT school, don't stop. You won't regret being resilient. I haven't talked to any Black scholar that says, ‘you know what? I regret getting a Ph.D. I regret getting a Pharm.D.’ So be resilient.”

“Do your research, to understand first of all that organization and how they embrace diversity. Look at the staff to see, do they have representation that looks like you and or have they been experiences similar to you have been?”

“Ask for what you need. People will try to make you feel stupid by asking questions or saying that you need an extra something or this thing would help you be successful. If you need it, you need it. So, ask for what you need.”

Participants situate success as an action, revealing advocacy as a pillar of resilience and success in graduate education. Participants reflected on opportunities missed and taken that contributed to their ability to be successful in their graduate program and chose to share their experience so other graduates can learn from their journey.

Build Community

Lastly, graduates share their wisdom creating success by providing practical opportunities for graduates to build community. The graduates' advice encourages graduate students to use innovative ways to create community and reminds them that a village is

necessary to thrive academically and professionally. Care must be taken to create intentional systems of support as graduates progress through their program.

“But I think having a village and having different types of support are so important. So, find people and they don't have to be Black people, but just find people to build your village up.”

“The biggest thing, is finding mentorship, even outside of a mentor, maybe even having somebody that is a good friend, somebody that you feel like you can confide in and provide advice to, or maybe somebody that you can just vent to.”

“You need loving relationships. And that doesn't mean that folks need to love you, but they don't need to create an environment of distress for you because you need people who are going to be your champions.”

“Seek mentors, seek different kinds of mentors. You also need sponsors. You need people who's going, they may not have the time to meet with you once a month or every other week, but when they hear about something and they're in a closed room with people, they'll bring you up like, oh, you know what? That's just good for that. I'm going to send you her email address. You need to reach out to her. But still seek mentors, seek plenty of mentors so that you don't have to rely on one, seek mentors for different purposes.”

“Give back. Always reach back. Like don't just move forward and not help those emerging Black professionals behind you. Always reach back.”

The last array of quotes reinforced the participants experience with building community and how it led to success in their navigation of graduate programs. This agentic approach maintains the notion that graduates must actively seek and create systems that foster their success. Community in the educational context depends on the graduates need and the realities they bring

into their new graduate environment. Thus, success can be enacted through the negotiations of resources and networks that graduates put in place for their benefit.

Summary of Findings

Chapter 4 presents a comprehensive exploration of how Black HBCU graduates navigate PWI graduate programs, focusing on exposure, support, and community across their educational experiences. It focuses on their early educational, HBCU, and PWI experiences and how those experiences shape their dynamic process of defining and achieving success. Graduates have understood and engaged with success in many different ways. From their K-12 experience to their success as an HBCU and PWI graduate, they have negotiated success in many different facets that helped them grow personally, academically, and professionally. They discovered success from the world around them, developed their own identity in success, and leveraged that identity and other success strategies to know success in their graduate program.

Two distinct themes emerged from the participants' shared perspectives of success: *leveraging support* and *building community*. These two themes present the responsive and reactive engagements graduates experienced navigating their graduate program at a PWI. The transition from HBCUs to PWIs required them to leverage their exposure to different academic environments and seek robust support systems. Support, both received and created, played a critical role in the graduates' academic and professional success. They found that building relationships with faculty, peers, and professional networks was essential for navigating the complexities of graduate programs at PWIs. Building and maintaining a sense of community was also vital for the graduates' success in their graduate program. Their interaction with community provided a level of agency and resolve that helped them navigate the politics and policies of graduate studies. Their stories positioned them as victors who have overcome academic

challenges with the help of their community and as agents of change making sure that there are examples of success for graduate students to come.

The graduates also engaged in reflective practices surrounding success by providing advice for future Black graduate students as they consider pursuing an advanced degree. The reflective narratives offered by the participants highlight success as perseverance and resilience, encouraging students to exercise self-awareness, seek support, and adopt a proactive agency to find their own success navigating PWI graduate programs. Their collective wisdom highlighted the importance of self-knowledge, self-advocacy, and the continuous pursuit of personal and academic growth. This chapter provides a synthesis of the graduates' narratives centering their experiences as Black scholars and underscoring the importance of supportive environments and community building in fostering success among Black graduate students.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Many times, research narrowly focuses on the challenges and obstacles Black graduates face obtaining a degree, especially when pursuing an advanced degree. While this discourse is necessary to understand, acknowledge, and address the very real educational inequities in degree attainment for Black graduates, it can perpetuate a narrative of defeat and provide a unidimensional lens on the academic tenure of Black graduate students. Anti-deficit or success-oriented research supplements the problem-oriented literature offering scholarship that investigates the ideas and ways that individuals succeed or see themselves as successful. The Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) discussed in Chapter 2, shifted the narrative from focusing on the challenges and barriers Black graduates face in higher education to highlight the strength and achievements of Black students (Harper, 2007). Additionally, Feagin and Sikes (1995) stress the need to listen closely to Black students' experiences to understand their success strategies, a principle echoed in the participants narratives.

Utilizing an anti-deficit Afrocentric framework, I sought to situate the graduate as the expert of success in their academic experience and center the ways they explored success based on their interests, values, and actions within the stories they shared. The graduates' narratives centered on resilience, community building, and proactive engagement within their academic environments, embodying the principles of ADAF. They privileged me with conversations that offered preliminary insights to the ways that they knew and developed success across their K-12 and HBCU experiences. That success would ultimately shape how they would enact success at their PWI to obtain their graduate degree(s). The stories shared by the graduates were not only about tenure and transition within their program but brought forth the lived experiences and realities that cultivated their identity in success and positioned them as successful agents within and outside of their institution.

The graduates experienced success from very early ages, discovering success from their support systems like family, guides, and mentors, or from a lack of support systems. Each graduate would come to define their developing success as their ability to navigate their personal and academic identity in the various educational settings. Their constitution for what made them successful would be reinforced by their family, teachers, guidance counselors, and their peers. They would grapple with the ways they saw themselves within their environments and make decisions about their ability to succeed from these encounters. As the graduates reflected on their HBCU experiences, they continued to wrestle with their developing success as more than an academic but as a person within and outside of the institution. This cultural identity development led to them situating themselves as professionals and community members where academic achievements, co-curricular experiences, and social engagements influenced who they became in this new space. Their HBCUs provided a space for discovery and innovation as they got to engage with self-awareness and reintroduce who they wanted to be. This space cultivated care and community orientations that would lend to their desire to further their education and ultimately influence their choice of attending a predominantly White institution for their graduate degree. The graduates thus began their graduate experience in another state of learning and exposure. They cultivated their academic and personal identity at their HBCU institution and would use their developed cultural identity as a root or anchor to leverage how they navigated the graduate space.

The literature in chapter 2 outlines the impact of HBCUs on Black students by providing nurturing environments that promote academic and personal growth (Allen, 1992; Perna et al., 2010). The graduates' experiences support the significance of HBCUs impact as the participants relied heavily on their HBCU experience to navigate PWI graduate programs successfully. While

the literature focuses on HBCUs impact on the personal and academic growth of the graduates, there is a cultural awareness and evolution that graduates experience at HBCUs that fosters their ability to be successful in graduate programs. It is the access to cultural capital received from their HBCU that empowers graduates to contribute their success to their cultural identity within and outside of the institution they attended for graduate school. Across their narratives, graduates enacted success by utilizing their personal, academic, and cultural identities in two primary ways: *leveraging support* and *building community*.

Graduates leveraged support by relying on internal and external support systems to help them continue to be successful in their degree programs. They shared many feelings surrounding an ‘othering’ experience where they came in knowing they were different from their graduate environment and needed support succeed at their institution. Nettles and Millet (2006) discuss the challenges Black students face in PWIs, emphasizing the cultural and social adjustments issues that impact Black students’ tenure at the institution. While the graduates’ stories corroborate the challenges and positional differences Black students face on PWI campuses, their narratives in this study highlight strategies they used to overcome hardship experienced during their graduate program. Their response to the support they received varied and suggested that success was more intimate to the individual graduate’s experience and how they saw themselves in that environment. Within this space, graduates elaborated on the nuance and complexity of support and revealed the impact that different institutional and community actors had on their success. The village model thus emerged as a visual representation of vital elements of support that enhance graduate student success within and outside of the institution. All of the graduates’ narratives exhibited great respect and care for the supportive characters in their lives and how they were recognized as a part of their community. The narratives emphasized the responsibility

graduates placed on these individuals to support their learning and development and spoke to the harm each missing element had on their resilience and success finishing their degree. The graduates received support as success if it helped them both academically and professionally. They required support to not only remain academically salient in their programs but to gain institutional and cultural access that they could leverage to navigate their institution more effectively.

In addition to the graduates identifying responsive measures of success through the support they received in their graduate programs; they adopted reactive positions of success by building the community they required to successfully navigate their graduate program. For instance, the graduates elaborated on building institutional and community support systems as a crucial part of their success, which included finding mentors and establishing networks and resources in various environments. This finding supports the literature's view that Black students often need to create and rely on their support systems to succeed in predominantly White environments (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Maton et al., 2011). The graduates recognized that there was an implicit responsibility for them to initiate help-seeking behaviors and create support systems that would help them sustain their developed identity and ideas of success. They sought community in various ways and at various levels building a network of scholars who could provide them insight on their program and ways to engage with success that appealed the professors in their program and department. From creating affinity spaces for Black students to exist authentically and holistically to being a mentor and a resource for students like their mentor was for them, the graduates sought ways to be successful in their own right and mimicked the actions of their support systems who impacted their academic journey along the way.

Limitations

Qualitative research does not seek to generalize findings but to assess the transferability of the findings to other social contexts. Narrative inquiry focuses on the in-depth exploration of individual stories which allowed me to explore the intricacies of the graduates' experience. Because this research was intended to provide detailed insights into specific contexts and personal experiences, there are limitations to the broad applicability of this study. Multivocality, mentioned in Chapter 3, was also used to capture the diverse realities of the participants and bring a variety of voices and experiences to this research. The study captures the experiences of Black HBCU graduates from various age groups, educational backgrounds, areas of study, and institution types. Each graduate's unique background means their experiences and perspectives are individualized. Success being an intimate, personal process means that each graduate developed their idea around success based on their encounters with their immediate environment and the larger community.

The literature surrounding Black student success identifies the importance of sociocultural contexts and their impact on students' ability to adapt and navigate predominantly white environments (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hillards, 2015; Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004). This study's findings are context specific and are tied to the time and place in which the participants experienced their journeys. Changes in sociocultural, political, and institutional contexts could significantly alter the experiences of individuals over time. The graduate's conditions and concerns may not exist in different times. One graduate mentioned her experience living through the George Floyd event and how her institution rallied around her to show care and consideration as she grappled with her identity as a Black woman. Her experience reveals that societal events, educational policies, and cultural norms can shape the narratives of

Black graduates and will vary across situational contexts. These contexts may not apply to other Black students or underrepresented groups and may be particular to certain settings. Even as the educational landscape evolves, the resources and supports available to students also change. For instance, the success narratives of Black students who pursue higher education and graduate education a significant time after COVID-19 and the Great Resignation may view success completely different from individuals in the past.

Throughout this research, I have also decisively chosen to stay proximal to the graduates as we share racial identities and academic experiences from differing perspectives. This proximity allows for a richer, more intimate engagement with the graduates that gave them the space to share their vulnerable truths and histories at higher education institutions, and impacted how their stories are understood and told. Exercising my responsibility to the narrative construction and (re)storying of the graduates' narratives means that complete objectivity was not achieved nor was it the goal. This research required careful selection and intentional decisions surrounding what was shared and may not represent the full experience of each graduate.

It is also important to note that the individuals who were willing to participate in this study may have a different experience than individuals who did not choose to participate. Most of the graduates found success in some way navigating their graduate programs at PWIs but that may not have been the case for another group of graduates selected to share their story. The experiences of the 14 participants captured in this study speak to their personal encounters pursuing advanced degrees and should be studied further to explore the full capacity of Black graduates' success at PWIs.

Implications

This study's findings provide implications for research and practice surrounding Black student success in graduate education, especially in transitional landscapes where graduates may feel positions of othering and distance that interfere with their ability to successfully navigate their graduate program. While the literature in Chapter 2 acknowledges the evolving educational contexts (Trammell et al., in press), the findings in Chapter 4 suggest that current events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, inflammatory legislation regarding academic enrollment, tenure, and resources, and exacerbated racial tensions and division have further complicated the higher education landscape for Black graduate students. While this research focused on the ways Black graduates overcame these barriers, the growing challenges present opportunities for researcher to continue to explore the evolving contexts to provide up-to-date support strategies for Black graduate students. This extends the literature by highlighting the need for ongoing research into the dynamic challenges faced by Black students (Johnson et al., 2022; Mitchell & Thompson, 2023).

The findings from this study offer opportunities to engage in proactive exercises that support the retention and matriculation of Black graduate students in graduate programs as they encounter challenging and/or compromising positions of othering and defeat. It is important for institutional agents, community members, and all academic stakeholders to provide holistic support for Black graduate students as they navigate new, foreign spaces that might position them as outliers in the graduate experience. Educators and practitioners should closely examine the support structures provided to Black scholars at their institution and ensure multiple areas of support are available to graduate students that will help them find their success in navigating the program.

For example, graduates shared the feeling of ‘not knowing what they don’t know’ speaking from a disposition of frustration and yearning for support and guidance. Graduate programs who anticipate serving Black graduates from HBCUs may create mentor villages for the students before their arrival. Mentor villages could include faculty, peer, and alumni mentors who provide valuable insight to the program, department and institution at large. By creating an internal support mechanism for Black graduate students, graduate programs prioritize their success and proactively seek to acknowledge their needs and interests as they began the socialization process into their graduate program.

Graduate programs could also incorporate the voice and ideas of Black graduate students into programming and support so that their research interests and professional goals can be actualized throughout the program. This could look like anticipatory advising, where the faculty advisor connects the Black graduate student with other faculty who share their research interest or administrators that can assist them with the issues they are facing.

Recognizing the limitations graduate programs have on time, resources, and support available to assist and recruit Black graduate students, there are opportunities to assess and evaluate the capacity that graduate programs and institutions have to support Black graduates and create innovative strategies to leverage the resources and support already available. By providing these support determinants of success, graduates will be more equipped to understand graduate processes and implied expectations required of them to navigate the institution like their peers.

Graduate programs and institutions should also provide opportunities for Black graduate students to feel welcomed and well-positioned in their program by finding ways to assist them with building community. Understanding that the graduate’s cultural identity is an important part

of their success in graduate school as they see themselves as full people who are a part of the institution and larger community, graduate programs can integrate community-oriented resources into their orientation workshops. An example of this would be a community resource directory for Black graduates that are acclimating to the area. Identifying salons, barber shops, food banks, banking institutions, housing resources, hangout spots, etc. could provide Black graduate students with the opportunity to create their own support networks. The graduates brought a diverse array of experiences to this study, identifying as parents, spouses, caretakers, entrepreneurs, career leaders, etc. Their capacity to be successful in graduate school depends on their ability to balance life and all the responsibilities they assume.

Graduate programs and departments have the opportunity to acknowledge these realities and provide support resources that show care and consideration for their students as professionals and individuals. By creating a community of care and support, educators and practitioners can position the students optimally to continue in their graduate degree program as successful, healthy agents of their graduate experience. To provide appropriate support and community for Black graduate students, the institution and community must be willing to understand the graduate students' interests, values, and needs as it relates to the program, department, institution, and community at-large.

Future research should continue to explore the success narratives of Black graduates engaging in graduate education to fully understand how they were able to matriculate and graduate despite the obstacles presented in the literature. There are opportunities to engage more critically with the intersectionality between race and power as many of the graduates saw their successful identity orientations develop around their racial identity and how that interacted with the power dynamics at their institution and within the community. Situating this work in an anti-

deficit Afrocentric frame allowed for an introductory exploration of identity, values, and beliefs of Black graduates as it pertains to success but did not serve as a critical landscape to fully explore the complexities of race, gender, and power that were prevalent in siloed environments or across the institution. Further understanding these complexities could offer richer understandings of Black HBCU graduates experience coming to PWI graduate programs and the plight of Black graduates in graduate programs overall.

Future research should also continue exploring Black student success by incorporating more stories and narratives from other graduates. The experiences of Black Americans and Black graduate students are not monolithic, and the stories represented in this research only begin to capture how Black graduates have come to imagine and define success for themselves. Examining the success of graduates' post pandemic may reveal different iterations or experiences of success that could situate educators and practitioners in different positions to support Black graduate students.

There are also opportunities to continue this work and understand how the graduates' experiences with success in their graduate programs translate to their professional identity in the workforce. A few conversations with the graduates suggested that their career trajectory and workforce decisions were directly influenced by their experience in the PWI environment. Their choice to return to an HBCU or find a culture that had a strong community of care and support stemmed from their personal and cultural view of success. Future research should explore how Black graduates enact decision-making strategies when seeking employment post-graduation from their PWI.

Conclusion

Overall, this study was proposed to provide insight on the success orientations of Black HBCU graduates and how they engage with success navigating their PWI graduate program. In Chapter 1, I introduced information on the degree attainment gap between Black graduate students compared to their counterparts and the educational disparities present in research and practice that situate Black students as outliers to success in all academic discourse. In Chapter 2, I illuminate the research surrounding Black student experiences by situating it in an Afrocentric framework that centralizes Black students as the experts and owners of their experience across all educational landscapes. This chapter also offers scholarship on historically Black colleges, further examining their impact on Black student success and advancement. In Chapter 3, I discuss how narrative inquiry is used to guide the study and how I capture the stories of the graduates as we discuss success orientations and make meaning of the concept together. I present actionable items that were implemented to maintain the integrity of the study and honor the experiences of the graduates.

In Chapter 4, I present findings surrounding success as augmented vignettes across the graduates' educational journey from K-12 to their graduate experience. Two primary themes arose regarding the graduates' perception of success navigating their graduate programs: leveraging support and building community. I offered a visual representation of a support mechanism I coined the village model which represented all the elements of support needed to support Black graduate success navigating their graduate program. I ended the chapter with lessons learned from the graduates, as an offering of care and wisdom from the graduates and a pragmatic, intentional decision to support Black individuals who are seeking or pursuing graduate

degrees. Finally in Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of the findings and how they shape research and practice surrounding Black student success, specifically Black graduate success. I further propose other opportunities to engage in research regarding Black graduate success and supplement the literature with positive orientations of Black graduates as central to their academic experience.

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