

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD: A CASE STUDY OF A HISTORICALLY BLACK
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES COLLEGE READINESS PROGRAM

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DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION IN
THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF BRIDGEPORT
BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT

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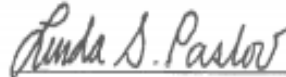


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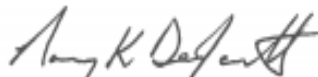
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ABSTRACT

Researchers are finding the traditional vision of college readiness is not working for today's disconnected youth. Hess (2010) and Hehir (2012) affirm that the one-size fits all approach for advising students about postsecondary education does not work for all students.

This retrospective case study sought the perspectives of participants in a college readiness program located in the 'gold coast' of Connecticut. For over thirty years, the program's goal has been to introduce Black, first-generation students from New England to Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Black students are generally as likely as their peers from other racial and ethnic groups to aspire to earn a college degree, yet in spite of their aspirations, remain under-represented in college enrollment and graduation (Holland, 2007).

This study is relevant because a workforce shortage of three million college graduates is expected (Carnevale et al., 2010). Blumenstyk (2020) predicts by 2027, 70% of all jobs will require some education beyond high school and fewer jobs will be available for people with some or no college degree. This prediction indicates a need for high school graduates to continue their education into college where they can learn the necessary skills to obtain a quality job in the future. However, certain underrepresented groups are accessing and persisting in college at lower rates than expected by many educators and policymakers.

Literature indicates that the first year of college can be more challenging for first-generation college students than their peers who have college-educated parents. The study also revealed that Black, first-generation students have a different experience than White students when on a college campus even when engaging with the same faculty and the same campus activities (Museus et al., 2017). College campus communities that provide an environment of

belonging and focuses on a culturally conscious framework, cultivates a connection for students to their campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and as a result have better retention rates that leads to more students graduating with bachelor degrees.

Keywords: First-Generation College Students, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Predominantly White Institution(s), Retrospective Case Study, Resilience, Motivation, Expectancy Value Theory, Sense of Belonging, Non-Academic Factors, Culturally Engaging College Campus, Critical Race Theory, The Black Church, The Black Community, College Readiness Programs

DEDICATION

I want to first dedicate this work to me. I believe we as women do not acknowledge our own accomplishments first. We are wired to be modest and told humility is a great quality forgetting many of us got to where we are because of our strength, tenacity and boldness. It takes wisdom and grit to be a maverick and for this Black woman, it also means having faith, discernment and self-reliance.

Next, I dedicate this to my family and friends who have supported me throughout this journey. This includes my guardian angels in Heaven who equipped me with the spirit of perseverance and provided me with the strength to pursue my dream of being a doctor.

I unequivocally have the best support network. If you are reading this, and pursuing a doctoral degree, I suggest you get yourself a good team, your own theme music [because every good hero should have some] and buckle up and hold on tight! This will be the most challenging, twisted ride you have ever taken. Like any terrifying roller-coaster, as soon as the ride stops, you will want to get back on. I gather if you are pursuing an Education Doctorate degree then you are a life-long learner with an insatiable appetite for information and knowledge.

I want to applaud the love and determination of my mother, her mother and her mother's mother better known as Mommie, Nana and Big Nana. I completed this dissertation standing on their shoulders. I come from a long line of brave, determined, confident women and am honored to continue to carry the torch. I have been blessed to have an army of female gladiators in my life. These are women warriors that have triumphed over life's most hellacious challenges and survivors who have battled Multiple Sclerosis, Cancer, and countless health issues that plague

our community. These women have done this unwaveringly with grace and an unshakable faith - never complaining.

I look to them...

I am in awe of them...

I lean on them...

I pray for them and share this victory with them.

Finally, I save the best for last – Thank you Lord! You are truly an awesome God. There were plenty of late nights that it was just you and me. As always, you had my back, front and sides. I would not be here without you...September 19, 1999

So, what's the next assignment?

Carpé Diem!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First given honor to God, my family and friends. The divinity in me recognizes and salutes the divinity in you. To all who sent up a word of prayer, offered a kind word of support or provided words of encouragement, I say Namasté...

Those closest to you often receive the backlash or for more colorful language, the ricochet when in the valley. I want to acknowledge and thank those closest to me for their unwavering support, especially for the days that I was not my usual ray of sunshine.

For the next generation – I always try to lead by example. It is exhilarating to know that my nephews and niece can proudly say they come from a family of scholars.

Each One, Teach one.

I also must acknowledge and thank my advisor, Dr. Christ and the members of my dissertation team: Dr. Paslov and Dr. Henderson. I honestly could not have done this without you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The juxtaposition between the movement to increase academic rigor in public schools versus the achievement gap and disparities in education that exist in school districts throughout the nation is vast. The widening of the achievement gap is an on-going discussion amongst policymakers (Hooker & Brand, 2010) and administrators. The inequities in education is underscored by dropout rates, low graduation rates and concerns of low college graduation rates in particular amongst African Americans and Latinos. These groups have asserted high school classes are uninteresting and irrelevant to their future. Many students feel unsupported and alienated thus making it increasingly challenging for teachers to capture their attention and interest to further their education at the postsecondary level. This retrospective case study examined the perspectives of students who went through a college readiness program whose goal over the past thirty years has been to introduce Black, first-generation students to Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

There are academic discussions and support around teachers and school districts modifying their curricula and making adjustments for minority, second language, and immigrant students. Similar discussions should be conducted concerning developing culturally sensitive curricula for the subcultures of African American students (Custodio & Loughlin, 2017) and in particular those that will be first-generation college students. Not providing opportunities for low-performing school districts that suffer from education inequities to compete on the same level as high performing districts is tantamount to ableism.

Ableism is a concept based on discrimination and oppression that people with disabilities experience in our society by the devaluing of their abilities and assertion they should perform at

the same level as non-disabled students (Hehir, 2003). This way of thinking devalues the physical or mental disabilities of these students, and as a result, thwarts their ability to receive adequate support services that could actually aid them in performing well. In this context, ableism is a metaphor to put into perspective the obstacles that many nondisabled minority students face in low-performing inner-city public school districts. To further support this notion, society treats people of color in specific ways to create barriers, and these poor conditions create inequalities. School districts that do not have resources and support services to provide the instruction and attention needed, in addition to a lack minority teachers that can provide a valuable perspective for these students, perform poorly and moreover, they are not providing a quality educational experience for students of color.

Researchers are finding the traditional vision of college readiness is not working for today's disconnected youth. Hess (2010) and Hehir (2012) affirm that the a one-size fits all approach for advising students about postsecondary options will not work for all students. Common Core State Standards were developed to give a national consistency to what is being taught in an effort to prepare students to be critical, creative thinkers, and ready for college or a career; the standards do not determine the instructional needs of students and resources necessary to teach specific groups (Gregory & Chapman 2013).

Effective teachers should understand that students can no longer be expected to learn by being forced through the same education hoops and should routinely be reminded that "one size doesn't fit all" (Gregory & Chapman, 2013, p. 1). Underachieving students in particular need a comprehensive set of resources and programs that can help them make informed choices regarding postsecondary education and careers. These intervention programs consist of

supportive adults that work with youth both in and out of school (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Successful college and career readiness (CCR) programs focus on providing a rigorous curriculum with staff members that understand the importance of developing college readiness skills.

Research shows that out-of-school programs provide an additional complement that contributes to the effectiveness of college-ready programs in that they provide early exposure to college (Lauer et al., 2006). College campus visits for high school students have promise (Hooker & Brand, 2010). The Ascend College Readiness Program (a pseudonym) has been taking students to college campus visits for 30 years. This precollege program was designed to prepare primarily Black first-generation college students for college and is located in Connecticut's "gold coast". 'Gold Coast' is a term used to describe an affluent neighborhood or town with expensive homes, and usually in a coastal area. Connecticut's gold coast consists of an affluent population in small towns as well as metropolitan cities with large, diverse populations. While some of the wealthiest people in the country live in Connecticut's gold coasts, including the chief operating officer and founder of the world's largest hedge fund (Dolan et al., 2021), there are also families living in some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the state. These drastically contrasting parallels can be likened to Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities" (1859).

This retrospective case study examined barriers Black students faced when preparing for college and focused on resilience and motivation as related to student success. Ascend College Readiness Program exposes select students to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) by taking them on a week-long trip to visit these campuses and provides support to parents and students throughout the admissions and financial aid process. Research shows that

first-generation compared to continuing-education students, who have college-educated parents, are more likely to drop out (Engle & Tinto, 2008) and less than half are likely to complete a degree in four years (Ishitani, 2006). Students who drop out often work a low-wage paying job while carrying the burden of student loan debt (Porter, 2013).

The Ascend College Readiness Program focuses on introducing Black, first-generation high school students to Historically Black College and Universities (HBCU) because Black students are generally as likely as their peers from other racial and ethnic groups to aspire to earn a college degree, yet in spite of their aspirations, remain under-represented in college enrollment and graduation (Holland, 2007). “In particular first-generation, low-income and disconnected youth need assistance in navigating the college search, application, and financial aid process which often acts as barriers to postsecondary enrollment” (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 83).

Problem Statement

This study is relevant as a workforce shortage of three million college graduates is expected (Carnevale et al., 2010). Blumenstyk (2020) predicts by 2027, 70% of all jobs will require some education beyond high school and fewer jobs will be available for people with some or no college degree. This prediction indicates a need for high school graduates to continue their education into college where they can learn the necessary skills to obtain a quality job in the future. However, certain underrepresented groups are accessing and persisting in college at lower rates than expected by many educators and policymakers. Although the value of postsecondary education has been well documented, traditionally underrepresented college-bound groups still exist in the higher education system. Underrepresented groups in higher education include

racial/ethnic minorities, the economically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students (Smith & Johnson, 2003).

First-generation students have non-academic challenges that often make their first-year transition into college more challenging compared to their White counterparts and non-first-generation students. Introducing Black, first-generation students to Historically Black Colleges and Universities may provide balance to their lack of college culture capital. Cultural capital allows White and non-first-generation students an advantage when transitioning into college campus culture, especially during their first year. According to Bourdieu (2003), cultural capital is used to reward those fluent in cultural practices of white middle class (1984). Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital is what people use to appropriate symbolic wealth. Stanton-Salazar (1997) contends that success within school has never been simply a matter of learning but rather learning how to decode the system. Most Black, first-generation university students come from low-income families (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006) putting them at a disadvantage as they are less likely to have the knowledge or access to decode the system.

Students' first year of college is vital to their college success. Black, first-generation students from low-income families often experience non-academic challenges prior to matriculating at a college. "Students of color exhibit lower rates of degree attainment than the overall population" (Museus et al., 2017, p. 187). Individuals from low income families, who have not earned a college degree will have lower lifetime earnings and are more likely to remain at or near poverty levels (Baum et al., 2010). For first-generation students of color from low income families, not earning a college degree will likely perpetuate the wealth and opportunity gap their families already suffer. Furthermore, increasing the numbers of individuals who attain

degrees has a positive impact on society. “This without a college degree will contribute fewer tax dollars and are less likely to engage in civic participation at local, state and national levels” (Museus et al., 2017, p. 188).

Research demonstrates that students need to feel a sense of belonging in college and this is positively associated with retention and degree completion (Hausmann et al., 2007). However, it is equally important that first-generation students are provided with skills and resources needed to be successful in college and integrate themselves into their campus culture during the initial period of transition (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993).

Black, first-generation, students from low-income families face a host of barriers and obstacles prior to entering their freshmen year of college. Non-academic factors present challenges that have little to do with academic preparedness. Lack of understanding of the college admissions process, campus culture, and the vernacular associated with campus culture, lack of financial means, and feelings of inferiority often contribute to the obstacles students face prior to their first day of class. The need for a college readiness program that can provide support and information for first-generation students and their parents could provide the external support needed.

Connecticut has 169 towns with five large cities and the Ascend College Readiness Program is located in one of the larger metropolitan cities in the most affluent counties in the state and country. This juxtaposition of low-income, disadvantaged African American students in an overall affluent county, profoundly illustrates the vast disparity between these students and their peers who have social, cultural, and financial capital that puts them at an advantage, making this study especially intriguing.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this retrospective qualitative case study was to examine the Ascend College Readiness Program and its mission to inspire and educate youth and their parents by introducing them to Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and then by taking students on college tours where they discover higher education opportunities. The Ascend College Readiness Program, working primarily with Black first-generation students, assists parents with the college admissions process. This study also examined the exposure of students to college options which could close the achievement gap between low-income, predominately Black students and their more affluent peers. Through the Ascend College Readiness Program, middle and high school students are introduced to Historically Black Colleges and Universities of higher learning with a proud history of welcoming and serving diverse populations.

It is critical to evaluate the perspectives of those who have completed the Ascend College Readiness Program and the impact on Black, first-generation students social and academic success in Historically Black Colleges and University campuses. This study relied on interviews of alumni, volunteer staff, the program director, and staff at Historically Black Colleges and Universities to understand if pre-college visits and parental support provided by school, the community, and religious affiliation supports Black, first-generation student success.

This study sought to determine (1) Whether the Ascend College Readiness Program influenced their decision to attend college and/or a historically Black institution? (2) Whether participants perceived their exposure to Historically Black Colleges and Universities through the program, to have impacted their transition into college and how so? (3) Whether the participants who attended a historically Black institution perceived that they transitioned well socially and

academically? (4) Whether participants perceived the institution in which they enrolled [whether it be an Historically Black College and University or predominantly White institution] to have had an impact on their postgraduate education and success in their careers?

The founder/program director, Alicia Eunice (a pseudonym), was exposed to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) during her high school years and considered it a life-changing experience. This experience motivated her to attend an HBCU in North Carolina. She described her visit to what is now her alma mater as feeling at home. Her goal for the program is to give students the college experience she had with the understanding that there was a void in exposure to HBCUs for students in New England. HBCUs typically do not participate in college fairs in the northeast, therefore, Ms. Eunice's recruitment efforts are vital to helping students gain access and exposure to Black institutions. To provide additional support, she encourages junior and senior students to bring their transcripts with them on the annual tour. If students know where they want to attend, she facilitates meetings with admissions counselor and has had success with getting students admitted during the tour. During the last campus tour, four students were accepted to three schools during the tour. She believes she is giving students options they likely would not have without her program.

Unlike many out-of-school time programs, the Ascend College Readiness Program is operated without any public funding or grants. The program is operated by the program director and with the help of volunteer staff that serve as counselors. The program receives in-kind contributions from local community groups that include non-profit organizations, professional groups, Black Greek-letter organizations [sororities and fraternities] and churches. These groups also show support by sponsoring students whose families cannot afford to pay the full tuition of

the program. Although these contributions are helpful, most of the tuition is paid parents of the students to pay. Given the majority of the program's participants are first-generation students from low-income families and impoverished neighborhoods, paying the \$800.00 tuition is not feasible.

The tenants of the Ascend College Readiness Program include parent involvement and community support. Parents are required to be actively involved in the program so they can be a support to their students throughout the college research and application process, and once their student is enrolled into college. The counselors in the program teach students and parents the college admissions process including preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and submission of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). However, it is important to note, in order for students to get the intended full experience, parents are not allowed to attend the college tour. The purpose is to provide students with a simulated experience of campus life that includes bonding with peers and freedom of expression in addition to independence, self-regulation, self-management and time-management, parents are not allowed to attend.

The hallmark of the Ascend College Readiness Program curriculum stems from the belief that Black students (especially first-generation) will be more successful in college attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Ascend College Readiness Programs program director established the pre-college program as an intervention to introduce first generation African American high school and middle school students from the New England area to HBCU campuses which are predominantly located in the southern states of the country.

The Ascend College Readiness Program director asserts that the curriculum, supportive social environment, and academic development that Historically Black Colleges and Universities

historically provided when Black students were not allowed to attend predominantly White institutions is still needed today (Alicia Eunice, personal communication, April 12, 2020). Studies have reported Historically Black Colleges and Universities have a higher retention rate because they provide a supportive environment and offer remediation for students who need it most (Fleming, 1984) proving that these schools are still effective for Black students despite desegregation of public schools, affirmative action, and the Civil Rights Movement. Many Black students still feel more comfortable and do better socially and academically at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

The Ascend College Readiness Program director indicated she wanted to give students the same experience she had when she attended an HBCU. She proclaims that as soon as she stepped on the campus of the school, she attended she felt at home and did not have the same experience when visiting other campuses (Alicia Eunice, personal communication, April 12, 2020). Studies by Allen (1992) and Davis (1991) support the notion that Historically Black College and University campuses provide a more positive campus climate.

Historically, Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were founded specifically to educate Black Americans as most of the students were refused admission elsewhere (Allen & Jewell, 2002). These land-grant institutions were supported through federal statutory efforts including the Morrill Act of 1890 (Brown & Davis, 2001). When established, the mission of HBCUs were “to produce graduates who are leaders in and contribute to their communities, the nation, and the world; and to provide teaching, research, and extension and public service through collaborative efforts, which improve the standard of living and quality of life of diverse populations, including limited-resource persons” (The Council of 1890 Presidents/Chancellors,

2000, p. 13). According to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities Council in the 1890s, there were nineteen Historically Black Colleges and Land-Grant Universities and two HBCUs designated under the Morrill Act of 1862 (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2021).

This case study will include analysis of the program's curriculum and workshops with high school students and parents, SAT preparation seminars, FAFSA workshops, and interviews with former students, parents, and program personnel involved in the 6-day college campus bus tour at approximately 10 college campuses annually. The program also included visits to a host church, and local landmarks and museums. Additionally, cultural rituals are practiced, and students are taught life skills, and time and money management in an effort to prepare them for college campus life.

Research Questions

This study examined the participants views of the Ascend College Readiness Program and whether they found that it was successful at introducing Black, first-generation students (and their parents) to Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The study also examined the participants' perceptions to determine if their experience was inspiring and whether the program helped them navigate through the difficult process of applying, enrolling and transitioning into college. The researcher used the following research questions:

1. Do participants in the study perceive the exposure to college provided by the Ascend College Readiness Program and in particular to Historically Black Colleges and Universities successfully prepared students (and their parents) for the college admissions process?

2. Do students who attended the Ascend College Readiness Program actually attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities as a result of participating in the program?
3. Do students who attend(ed) Historically Black Colleges and Universities perceive they transitioned well socially and academically into their postsecondary institution?

Bounding the Case

This research study took place in Fairfield County, Connecticut with nine former Ascend College Readiness Program participants, three volunteer counselors, the program director and three Historically Black College and University Admissions staff. The researcher collected data March 2020 and September 2020. The interviews were conducted as follows: program director in April, program alumni participants April through May, program volunteer staff in May and Admissions Department staff at Historically Black Colleges and Universities April through June. The researcher conducted member-checking August through October, 2020.

All the participants in the study are identified as Black and not African American. The researcher chose to make this distinction of Black versus African American because every Black person is not African American. Participants may be of West Indian, Caribbean, Afro-Latino and/or African decent and prefer to be referred to as Black versus African American which is generally used when identifying as descendants of Black slaves in the United States who were transported from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade.

The researcher believed it was important for readers to understand the regional culture of the geographic location where the Ascend College Readiness Program took place and the location of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the study. In order to protect the

identity of the participants, institutions and locations where the study took place, pseudonyms are used throughout the study.

The research study was approved by the University of Bridgeport Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher met with each participant, explained the purpose of the study and communicated their role by participating in the research study. Participants were given a consent form to complete in order to have their permission to participate.

Limitations

This retrospective case study reports on the experiences of former Ascend College Readiness Program (ACRP) participants. A limitation of the study is the small sample size and ratio of female compared to male participants. However, it is important to note the ratio is indicative of the gap between Black men and women earning postsecondary degrees.

In addition, due to Covid-19, the ACRP pre-college preparation program curriculum has been modified and provides virtual workshops and information sessions for students. The annual college campus tours to Historically Black Colleges and Universities have been suspended until it is safe to resume travel to the campuses. Although the limitations aforementioned impacted the 2020- 2021 academic year, it had minimal impact on the case study.

Table 1

Definition of Terms used throughout the study

DEFINITION OF TERMS	
Culturally Engaging Campus	Comprehensive and culturally conscious
Environment Model of College Success	Framework that explains how a campus

Connecticut's Gold Coast	<p>environment influences student success (Museus et al, 2017)</p> <p>Includes most of Fairfield County Connecticut and includes the towns of Greenwich, New Canaan, Darien, Stamford, Westport, Weston, Wilton, Ridgefield, Redding, Brookfield, New Fairfield, and Easton (CT Datahaven, 2004).</p>
First-Generation College Student	<p>Can be defined as students who have parents that did not attend college, or students who have parents that did not earn a college degree but have some college experience (Smith, 2015).</p>
Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU)	<p>According to Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965, Congress officially defined an HBCU as a college or university that must be accredited by a nationally recognized agency and dedicated to the education of Black Americans and established prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Department of Education, 2020).</p>
Out-of-School Time Programming	<p>A supervised program that young people regularly attend when school is not in session.</p>

This can include before and after school programs and multipurpose programs that provide an array of activities (US Dept of Health & Human Services).

Predominantly White Institution (PWI): Term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which the student population consists of 50% or greater that are White (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic and Non-Academic Factors for First-Generation College Students

Underrepresented students have been shown to possess both academic and non-academic risk factors that can act as barriers to college access and persistence (Corrigan, 2003).

Students from underrepresented groups often lack the social capital to understand the world of postsecondary education, as they are less likely to have role models who have attended institutions of higher education, and they may have less collective college knowledge in their communities. (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 77).

Barriers for First-Generation College Students

A review of the literature reveals a variety of academic and non-academic barriers that exist for disadvantaged college students, and often multiple barriers are interconnected. These non-academic barriers include lack of safe and stable housing, lack of parental support, and exposure to both community and domestic violence. These barriers increase students' risk of not achieving academic success in grade school and as a result not enrolling into college. Academic barriers are one of the main reasons low-income students struggle to graduate from high school and attend college, because they lack access to academic resources that more affluent students possess, such as technology and print materials (Corrigan, 2003).

College and Career Readiness. Research indicates the need for college and career readiness (CCR) programs with the goal to help students prepare for, and enroll into, college. There is a need for these programs to focus on underrepresented populations and first-generation students. First-generation college students are students whose parents have not attended college or have

attended but did not earn a college degree. These students face an array of challenges and most come from low-income and minority backgrounds (Engle, 1997).

After-school pre-college preparation programs such as Ascend College Readiness Program can serve as an intervention to facilitate college access for first-generation students by helping them learn how to navigate the complex process of college admission and the educational system. First-generation (Black) students face challenges with applying to college and retention once matriculated into college. The Ascend Program provides assistance and support in addition to introducing these students to Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Because students who are not first generation have the advantage of experiencing college through their parents' knowledge and experience, their transition from high school into higher education is not an extreme and intimidating adjustment. First generation students have to make much more complex academic, social, and cultural transitions into college life in particular during the first year (Terenzini et al., 1994). According to Hernon and Hirt (2004), Black students at predominately White institution campuses (PWIs) need social support from family for issues regarding their minority status, while Blacks at predominately Black universities rely on themselves and show more independence. This could largely be due to lack of social integration of minorities at PWIs in contrast with the high rate of social integration for Black students at HBCUs.

Research indicates that despite these programs, many which have the support of the community and school district, they still struggle to reach their goal of increasing college enrollment rates. According to Snyder and Dillow (2010), only 70 percent of all high school graduates in the United States enroll in higher education. Although college rates have increased,

students whose parents did not attend college, students of lower socioeconomic status, and students of minority backgrounds are less likely than their peers from non-marginalized groups to graduate high school, pursue college degrees, and succeed once at college (College Board, 2010).

David Conley, a notable educational researcher of College and Career Readiness (CCR) has conducted extensive studies on the topic and defines college readiness as the level of preparation a student needs in order to succeed without being required to take prerequisite remedial courses (Conley, 2007). Conley (2007) posits the concept of CCR is not new but the idea that when students graduate from high school they should have the necessary knowledge and skills to pursue college and a career.

Conley's framework on CCR has four facets and primarily focuses on academic factors: Key Content Knowledge, Academic Behaviors, Contextual Skills and Awareness, and Key Cognitive Strategies (Conley, 2007). To his credit, his research has caused educators, practitioners, and policymakers to rethink how CCR is defined and encourages high school and higher education institutions to collaborate to help students successfully prepare and transition into college and careers. His research has also caused educators to pilot interventions and, as a result, new evaluation instruments have emerged to measure student readiness.

Pathways and Policy. Baber, Castro, and Bragg (2010) conducted a study on Illinois College and Career Readiness Act and David Conley's College and Career Readiness framework. The State of Illinois College and Career Readiness Act Program was legislation adopted in 2007 to ensure that students were prepared for a successful transition from high school to college (Barber et al., 2010).

Similar to culturally responsive teaching, where teachers use cultural knowledge and experiences of diverse students to make learning more effective (Gay, 2002), in order for CCR programs to be effective, they should approach their framework in this fashion. One size does not fit all for teaching, therefore, one size does not fit all when approaching CCR (Baber et al., 2010).

Like the state of Illinois, Connecticut has programs where their state community colleges and universities partner and collaborate with high schools to help students successfully transition into college by allowing them to take college-level courses while in high school. The High School Partnership Program and College Career Pathways are bridge programs that allow students to take community college courses while in high school at no cost. In addition, the University of Connecticut Early College Experience partners with over 160 high schools throughout Connecticut. It is one of the largest concurrent enrollment programs in the United States both by student enrollment and by the number of courses offered (SDE, 2018). However, although helpful, these programs allow students to take introductory college-level courses, they do not address non-academic factors that are barriers for first-generation students. Also, the High School Partnership Program is limited and offers two spaces per feeder high school.

These bridge programs are helpful for students to become acclimated to college culture and test their ability to keep up with the rigor of college-level coursework, but they do not address the familial, cultural, and financial barriers many first-generation students face. The non-academic factors can be just as impactful and influence a student's desire and ability to attend college and, once there, their success.

According to Engle (2007), many first-generation students typically apply to one college. Banks-Santilli (2014) believes first-generation students limit their college options largely due to non-academic factors such as knowing little information about academic degree programs, not understanding the college admissions process and not having the financial means to pay for multiple admissions applications. Contrary to what many first-generation students and their parents believe, being admitted to college is not the most challenging aspect of their journey, it is surviving the transition and graduating that is most challenging. In addition to academic achievement and financial support, there are essential skills students need in order to thrive and be successful in college.

Literature reveals that camp programs, much like out-of-school time or after-school college preparatory programs, provide support and increase academic interests for students. Furthermore, studies have shown that camp programs motivate students and promote college readiness skills. More importantly, research on College and Career Readiness reveals that a number of skills are needed prior to attending college but are essential to success at college (Whittington & Garst, 2018). Whittington and Garst's (2018) study examined whether attending camp promotes college readiness skills in camp alumni and revealed the following skills - independence, teamwork, resilience, leadership, communication, self-efficacy, time management and critical thinking skills - can be gained and practiced during camp participation. This study was conducted in 2016 and reported on the impact camp has on college readiness skills and how the experience can influence educational choices (Whittington & Garst, 2018). This study's sample of participants were 80% female and 97% white. Unfortunately, this sample lacked diversity, but is congruent with the demographics of the 2016 national camper enrollment data collected by the American

Camp Association (Wilson, 2017). The majority of the participants are middle-class or higher White females.

Whittington & Garst (2018) use a basic definition of college readiness that could be applied to the population of their study but, unfortunately, does not encompass a full perspective of today's college student. Whittington & Garst define college readiness as a student's level of preparation or capacity to enroll in and complete, without remediation, credit-bearing courses at a postsecondary institution (2018). This definition, similar to Conley (2007), only defines college readiness as an academic achievement and not from a holistic lens that includes non-academic challenges.

Whittington & Garst's (2018) research indicated the average length of stay in camp programs to be one week and many campers attend multiple years, then take on leadership roles as counselors. Themes throughout the camp study suggest camp influenced future choices for career and college due to the experience influencing perseverance that supported their success (Whittington & Garst, 2018) and expectancy-value theory (Atkinson, 1957), suggesting camps influences college and career choices (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Whittington and Garst's (2018) research adds value to the topic and supports the need for more studies to be conducted that focuses on innovative ways to approach college readiness.

Researchers Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012) define college readiness as an umbrella term used to describe the complex, interconnected skills needed in order to be successful in college. Although the study of College and Career Readiness is relatively new research with new studies being conducted and themes emerging, the study lacks diversity in race and gender. Moreover, the current information does not explore socioeconomic factors, perseverance, and resilience as

skills needed for first-generation students and those suffering from economic challenges. Data presented by the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2018) collected by the U.S. Department of Education from years 2015-2016 states that 56% of college students in the United States are first-generation and 65% of first-generation students receive financial aid.

Emerging Themes in Literature

While reviewing literature, several themes including resiliency, educational resiliency, motivation, and protective factors emerged and the role they play in influencing students' academic success and mitigating risk factors. Using a sample of African American adolescents, Yakin and McMahon (2003) found that community support (i.e., church attendance, participation in community-related activities, and received support from the community) was positively associated with adaptive appraisals of community violence (i.e., less concern about violence, a greater sense of control over violence, and feeling that violence was more predictable).

Literature revealed that studies demonstrate stability and positive relationships with peers and adult-mentors reinforce emotional connections impacting educational success and post-secondary attendance (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Also, studies have revealed that engagement in extracurricular activities may promote interpersonal competence and raise educational expectations (Mahoney et al., 2003). According to Feldman and Matjasko (2005), adolescents who participate in extracurricular activities may develop a sense of initiative, associate with a greater number of academically oriented peers, and build valuable social and cultural capital. These students who participated in these activities show resiliency and perseverance despite barriers in their communities. The study of resilience in development has

overturned many negative assumptions and deficit-focused models about children growing up under the threat of disadvantages and adversity (Masten, 2001).

Although community violence was not a central theme for this case study, it is important to note that as a result of the economic gap and exclusionary zoning that results in segregated housing, many Black families are in low-income communities and are exposed to violence more often than their White counterparts. This is especially relevant because this study focuses on Black, first-generation students living in Connecticut's gold coast where some of the most affluent communities and contrastingly, some of the poorest communities in the north east are located.

Resilience Theory

The most surprising conclusion emerging from studies of children growing up in impoverished communities, experiencing disadvantages and facing adversity, is the ordinariness of resilience. The study of resilience in development has overturned many negative assumptions and deficit-focused models about children growing up under the threat of disadvantage and adversity. Resiliency Theory provides a theoretical framework for this retrospective case study of this community-based college readiness program, which supports a strengths-based approach for understanding youth and developing appropriate interventions (Zimmerman & Brenner, 2010).

According to Masten's research (2001), converging findings emerged from variable-focused and person-focused investigations on students who have shown resilience and suggests that it is common and that it usually arises from the normative functions of human adaptational systems, with the greatest threats to human development being those that compromise these

protective systems. Masten posits that resilience is common if provided the proper resources; resilience and perseverance is not difficult to achieve.

Educational Resilience

Educational resiliency, defined as the heightened likelihood of school success despite adverse environmental conditions, is enhanced by family engagement and school relationships (Schroeter et al., 2015). Bryan (2005) describes facilitators of educational resilience as “positive and supportive adult relationships, opportunities for meaningful student participation in their schools and communities, and high parent and teacher expectations regarding student performance and future success” (p. 219). External protective factors can be embedded into individual and social interventions in order to overcome adverse experiences (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Piaget’s Ideology

Until nearly 40 years ago, many scholars believed the Piaget cognitive theory described child development. The tenants of Piaget’s ideology are that the child’s development and knowledge is formed based on their actions and experience in the world. Over the past 20 years these ideas have been challenged and new theories emerged. The main tenets of Vygotsky’s (1978) cultural theory focuses on the importance of social interaction to child development. Furthermore, he believes that student learning depends on the quantity and quality of interpersonal and social interaction process. Boyden & Mann’s (2005) perspective is that all psychological phenomena originate through interpersonal interaction and, hence, social and cultural context provide this framework.

Like Piaget, Vygotsky asserts learning occurs through experience but instead of the focus on the individual, the individual's development is reflective of activity and interaction, interpersonal relations, goal-directed behavior, and shared understandings (Rogoff, 1990). As a result of their environment, cultural activities, and guidance from more skilled peers, siblings, and adults, can help children learn to think and to develop new skills and more mature approaches to problem solving (Rogoff, 1990). Bruner sums it up by saying, "If Piaget was preoccupied with the invariant order of mental development, Vygotsky was on his part preoccupied with how others provide the cultural patterning that makes the process of development possible" (1997, p. 69). Furthermore, although adolescence is marked by increases in autonomy and time spent away from family, relationships with caregivers remain an important developmental influence throughout this period (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an educational research theory, credited to Derek Bell as the originator and force behind 'the movement' (Lee, 1995). CRT describes the inequities and inequalities in law, politics, and inherent in education. CRT tenants focus on racial inequities deeply woven within the fabric in United States political and judicial systems, and due to its origin from Critical Legal Studies, CRT is the inspiration for this study. Education is political and racial inequities are rooted in America's political foundation. Furthermore, critical theorists conduct research through a lens that enables them to see the inequities and power structures in society and work to expose them in effort to create balance and equality. CRT is finding more

utility as a tool for research in educational leadership and can be an effective tool for conducting and analyzing educational research (Beachum et al., 2008).

Horace Mann wrote in 1848 that education is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery. He was referring to men when he wrote this but today women and individuals regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status have the right to free and quality education as well. Gerardo Gonzalez (2001) adds further emphasis by asserting that, “Education is the great equalizer in a democratic society, and if people are not given access to a quality education, then what we are doing is creating an underclass of people who will challenge our very way of life” (n.p.).

The participants in this case study are all Black, first-generation college students who have non-academic barriers that put them at a disadvantage to their White peers in Connecticut’s gold coast. Despite living in one of the wealthiest counties in the country, these students are not wealthy and their parents were unable to provide the financial and college campus culture capital needed to prepare them for college. These obstacles coupled with the lack of access to resources that are historically contributing factors to the systemic oppression experienced by Black African Americans in the United States, are why Critical Race Theory is one of the theories used to research the complex topic of a college-readiness program whose mission is to provide access and support to Black first-generation students in Connecticut.

Resilience Theory

Resilience generally describes individuals who have successfully overcome significant adversity including the development and implementation of strategies for dealing with racism in and out of the classroom and non-classroom domain

despite their exposure to multiple high-risk situations (Fraser & Richman, 1999). It is also defined as a student's ability to resist, persevere, and develop coping mechanisms in a harsh learning environment that is crucial key to one's academic success (Robinson & Ward, 1991).

Expectancy-Value Theory: Motivation

The Expectancy-Value theory (EV) achievement motivation theory model was also used and is an important motivation approach to learning theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) that has been widely used in many studies. The term 'motivation' differs among theorists and researchers from different fields and domains. This framework has consistently showed that higher expectancy of success and task values tend to result in more motivation, persistence, resilience, and success (Yang & Mindrila, 2020). Motivation is affected by both individual and social factors. EV theory consists of two parts: (a) cognitive and (b) social. From the point of cognitive view, Eccles et al., (2004) defined motivation as the combination of learners' expectancy for success and their value beliefs in a task.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Research has been described as a systematic investigation (Burns, 1997) or inquiry whereby data is collected, analyzed and interpreted in some way in an effort to "understand, describe, predict or control an educational or psychological phenomenon or to empower individuals in such contexts" (Mertens, 2005, p.2).

Across the methodological spectrum, social inquirers are challenged by multiple critical issues. These critical issues include the complexity of human phenomena, the location of context in human action, the role of values in inquiry, and the role of inquiry in society. According to Greene (2007), different methodological traditions offer different responses to the current issues and challenges, and in turn, shape the knowledge generated from a study and the warrants for that knowledge.

Qualitative research methodology was used to study past participants' perceptions of the Ascend College Readiness Program by conducting interviews and also "using existing data that have been recorded for reasons other than research" (Hess, 2004, p.1171). Research paradigms and methodology work together to form a research study. Paradigms are the lenses used to view your research. As Maxwell states, "theory is a statement about what is going on with the phenomena that you want to understand" (2013, p. 49).

Participants perceptions of the Ascend College Readiness Program were solicited to determine if the program achieved its intended goal of introducing Black first-generation students to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) (Brouselle & Champagne, 2011). First-generation students were interviewed to determine if the Ascend College Readiness Program supported their experience with the college admissions process and applying for

financial aid. Former students were interviewed and asked open-ended questions to determine whether they perceived the program and their experience of participating influenced their decision to enroll in a historically Black institution or at a predominantly White institution. In addition, the researcher wanted to learn whether participants had recommendations of how to improve the program, and finally whether participation in the program made an impact on their post graduate success with continuing their education and career success.

The researcher approached the study with a sensitivity to the context and all the cues and nuances in it, including physical setting, people, overt and hidden agendas, verbal and non-verbal data, as well as personal bias. Further, the final product is the emic perspective as filtered through the researcher's perspective, and this calls for sensitivity to how her own biases and subjectivity may affect the study and findings.

Researcher Positionality

The Researcher in this study took on an emic stance. Like the participants, the researcher was a first-generation college student and attended a historically Black institution prior to transferring to a predominantly White institution. Like other participants in the study, the researcher experienced non-academic, external factors when enrolling and attending college. The researcher found campus and cultural challenges both at the HCBU then at the PWI where non-academic pressures existed in addition to financial limitations. However, family and community support were protective factors that aided during the initial transitional period and continued throughout the researcher's college experience.

Unlike the participants, the researcher did not participate in a college readiness program but attended a college preparatory secondary school and had limited exposure to Historically

Black Colleges and Universities prior to attending college. An experience similar to the participants in the College and Career Readiness Program could have made the transition easier. Furthermore, having the support and guidance during the admissions process would have been helpful when deciphering the code language that is unique to the culture of higher education that students have that are not first-generation.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher embraced a role as an emic with a role as a constructivist, ontological, epistemological, and axiological worldview. The researcher examined the Ascend College Readiness Programs' success in education and career preparation. As a participant in the study, the researcher, with participants, co-constructed meaning of data. The researcher brought her own bias to the study, prior to collecting existing data, but used procedures including member check, considering rival explanations, and expert audit to increase the credibility of the finding interpretations. These procedures were used to minimize researcher bias. Additionally, the researcher reflected on her own experience as a student who attended both a historically Black and a predominantly white University. Self-reflections included journaling, were used to set aside prejudgments, bias, and any preconceived ideas that may have arisen during the course of the study (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008).

Research Design

Member Check

The transcribed interview data was manually coded line-by-line using an axial coding strategy and in vivo coding was used as a way to capture the essence and meanings of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). Interviews were transcribed and member-checking with

participants conducted in addition to constant comparative method which consists of constant interplay among the researcher, the data and the developing theory(ies) (Burke Johnson & Christensen, 2013).

The researcher used observational tools including video recordings, photos and program curriculum. Including these various strategies for collecting data that supports the credibility and validity of the study. Triangulation of data sources within and across different qualitative methods means that the researcher compared and cross-checked the consistency of information received at different times and by different means such as interviews, observation via virtual meetings and secondary data (Patton, 2014).

Multiple attempts at reviewing the gathered information and verifying coding enabled the researcher to perform a more detailed analysis of the data collected. These multiple exposures to the materials also aided in the clarification of additional themes as well as identifying potential relationships that might have existed among themes, subthemes, and categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Consider Rival Explanations

Because the researcher has a bias and is connected to the study, careful coding line-by-line will safeguard against motives and values influencing data analysis. According to Charmaz (2014), careful coding also helps the researcher to refrain from imputing their own motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues to respondents and to collected data.

Following Maxwell's (2013) advice of reviewing notes, interview transcripts and developing coding categories by applying this praxis to data analysis, codes were developed from emergent themes after collecting data not preconceived prior. When participants presented

data that rendered contrasting information from the emerging themes, the researcher examined the contrasting data and included it in data analysis. The contrasting themes added credibility to the body of information gathered.

Credibility and Validity

Credibility and validity procedures were followed in this study in which the researcher evaluated the findings and included ethical considerations, following approved protocol and interpreted the results with honesty and integrity (Creswell, 2009). According to Creswell, “qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures” (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). According to Maxwell (2013), validity depends on the relationship of the researcher’s conclusions to reality and a single method cannot totally guarantee that this is captured.

To further ensure validity, this researcher employed respondent validation with member-checking of the 16 interviews with participants and triangulated the three primary data sources and levels of participants. Maxwell (2013) asserts triangulation is a technique that involves using different methods as a form of checks and balances to assess the strengths and limitations of data strands in order to support a single conclusion.

As the researcher was the “primary instrument” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008, p. 2) for data gathering, analysis, and interpretation in qualitative research, researcher bias could not be completely avoided (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). Yin (1994) suggests that a good test for bias is the degree to which one is open to contrary findings. As a researcher that has a bias, it was imperative to ensure that credibility, reliability and trustworthiness was established. The researcher also allowed theories to emerge from synthesizing data and not from personal values

and bias. The researcher also triangulated data sources within and across different qualitative methods to compare and cross-check the consistency of information received at different times and by different means such as interviews, observations and secondary data (Patton, 2015).

Yin (1994) describes the five research skills necessary when conducting a case study:

1. Having an inquiring mind and the willingness to ask questions before, during, and after data collection, and to constantly challenge oneself as to why something appears to have happened or be happening.
2. The ability to listen, including observing and sensing in general, and assimilating large amounts of new information without bias.
3. Must possess adaptability and flexibility to accommodate unanticipated events and to change data collection activities if preliminary analysis points to additional or alternative sources.
4. Must have the ability not to just record data but to synthesize data in order to interpret and react to it as it is being collected. The researcher must be able to determine if different sources of data contradict one another and if additional sources are required.
5. Researcher must lack bias in interpreting data. It is also important to note, Yin suggests that a good test for bias is the degree to which one is open to contrary findings. Yin iterates, the most important element in a case study is the researcher's ability to recognize and handle a variety of evidence garnered from diverse data collection techniques.

Figure 1

Researcher Matrix

Researcher's Worldview	Constructivist	Critical (Race) Theory
Epistemology: Theory of knowledge construction	Researcher will co-construct views & opinions of participants in the study from an emic perspective; explain researcher's bias and collect data & artifacts from multiple sources to add credibility -- field notes observing students/teachers; conduct interviews with program's director, alumni participants, volunteer program counselors, and professional admissions office staff at historically Black colleges and universities.	Inequities and inequalities in Education has existed since the establishment of the country's education system. This systemic bias is a political hot-button issue and continues to be the source of the achievement gap for K-12 school districts and as a result, impacts students' success in higher education. Policymakers and stakeholders refer to this issue as zip codes determining access to quality education. First-generation college students are typically from these school districts that have had limited resources and access to quality education, coupled with limited knowledge and understanding of the colleges admissions process, financial means and understanding of college culture and as result, facing multiple barriers in effort to attain a bachelor degree. These non-academic challenges have a direct impact on retention graduation rates. Although this phenomenon is not transformative because it does not affect all college students, it is or should be a national concern nonetheless.
Ontology: What exists in the world	Review experiences of participants as alumni of the	Participants respond to interview questions to add to

	college readiness program and how/whether being first-generation Black college students impacted their [first year] college experience.	information regarding their choice of college, education goals and whether external/nonacademic factors contributed to their choices.
Axiology: Values in research	<p>Researcher makes values transparent in study and strives to reduce bias in interpretation and analysis. Value of observation and interviews -</p> <p>Data strands: observations, interviews, and secondary source data collection. The researcher's goal is to provide an understanding to readers of the value in additional research and programs with the focus of Black first-generation students and their first-year college experience with the ultimate goal of balancing the inequalities in Education.</p>	<p>Researcher will be transparent about values & bias regarding relationships to participants and bias towards historically Black colleges and universities and predominantly White institutions while conducting an in-depth literature review, collect data, field notes, observations & artifacts in effort to conduct a case study that consists of thick rich data to provide change additional information for college readiness programs and legislation to better prepare and support Black first-generation college students.</p>
Methodology: How the processes of research are used	Inductive Approach: Explanatory case study	Data of qualitative analysis: Curriculum, Interviews, Observations Secondary Source Data: Artifacts: Program Calendar, Annual Budget, Admissions Application, Social Media Accounts, and Photographs. "Hermeneutics provides theoretical framework for interpretive understanding or meaning with special attention to content and original purpose" (Patton, 2015, p. 136).

Participants

Adult alumni (nine) who participated in the program, volunteer program counselors (three), the director, and admissions counselors (three) working at historically Black colleges and universities participated in this study for a total of 16 participants (see Table 2). Alumni from 1990 to 2019 were included to provide a breadth of information and perspectives of the program from its inception to its current curriculum and practices. The majority of the students were from the same public school district, but some attended private schools and saw the Ascend program as an opportunity to visit historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Sampling

The sampling for this study was purposeful consisting of nine former students who are now alumni of the program, three volunteer program counselors, the program director and three Historically Black Colleges and Universities Admissions and Student Affairs staff. Participants were selected via a snowball sample and initially recruited through social media announcements and word of mouth of alumni participants sharing information with other program alumni. The researcher posted a social media message to recruit alumni program participants and posted on the researcher's Facebook personal page as well as on the program's Facebook page.

The first two participants included Participant 1 who asked her friend and former classmate, Participant 2, if she would like to participate. After interviewing Participant 2, she recommended her brother, Participant 3. Participant 3 recommended his nephew, Participant 4, who participated in the last year of the program prior to the disruption due to Covid-19 pandemic. He was a freshman in college and still living on campus in Alabama during the interview. Participant 4 recommended his friend, Participant 5, and former high school classmate to

participate. Participant 5 also attended the last year of the program in 2019. Participant 6 saw the Facebook announcement on the program’s dedicated Facebook page and offered to participate. Participant 7 contacted the researcher via social media in response to the Facebook announcement and recommended Participant 8. Participant 9 was the elder sister of Participant 1 (see Table 2 below).

Table 2
Study Participants’ Profile

Participants	Gender	Year Attended Program	Attended HBCU	Attended PWI	First-Generation Student	Bachelor’s Degree
Program Director Alicia Eunice	F		Y	N	N	Y
Alumni 1 Celia	F	1994	Y	N	Y	Y
Alumni 2 Robin-Lynne	F	1996	Y 1yr	Y	Y	Y *After dropping out
Alumni 3 Avery	M	1990	Y	N	Y	Y
Alumni 4 Ahmad	M	2019	Y	N	Y	Y
Alumni 5 Tiana	F	2019	Y	N	Y	Y

Alumni 6	F	1992	N	Y	Y	Y
Aidaire						
Alumni 7	F	2008	Y	Y 1yr	Y	Y
Emma						
Alumni 8	F	2005	N	Y	Y	Y
Etta						
Alumni 9	F	1994	Y	N	Y	Y
Yvonne						
Counselor 1	F		Y		Y	Y
Kelly						
Counselor 2	F		Y		N	Y
Kai						
HBCU	M		Y	Y Masters	N	Y
Admissions Staff 1 Mr. Smith						
HBCU VP	F		Y	N	Y	Y
Enrollment Staff 2 Ms. Martíne						
HBCU	F		Y	N	N	Y
Admissions Staff 3 Mr. Royce						

Data Collection

Rich data was collected through interviews, meeting observations, field notes, and a review of secondary data sources. The majority of the data collected for this study included participant interviews and pre-existing data retrieved from the program director and the program social media page and fieldnotes taken during the mandatory meeting for all students prior to the scheduled college campus tour. Additionally, the researcher observed four virtual college admissions information meetings during late April through June as a participant observer (Patton, 2014). These meetings were scheduled as an alternative to admissions college campus tours and to provide an opportunity for students to ask questions directly. “Students want to know the status of their admissions application and if campuses will be open in the fall” (A. Eunice, personal communication, June 2, 2020).

Interviews were conducted via a virtual platform that provided the researcher and participants the ability to meet face to face. This proved to be a helpful alternative to in-person meetings that were not possible due to the COVID-19 health pandemic. According to Maxwell, “Intensive interviews enable the researcher to collect data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (2013, p.126). Finally, artifacts were collected including the program curriculum, annual college campus tour itinerary, program activities, and program budget.

Data Strands

Researcher Reflective Journal

The researcher drafted field notes in a journal throughout the study to capture details that would be beneficial and pertinent to explaining the case study procedures and analysis. The

researcher’s notes included specifics about the program and secondary source data collected including the program admissions application, program budget, and 6-day tour itinerary. Emerging themes that developed throughout the study were documented in the research journal (see Table 3). Additionally, the researcher observed one of the in-person meetings with the expectation of attending future meetings in preparation for the college tour trip. Unfortunately, the onset of the COVID-19 Coronavirus national health pandemic caused the college tour to be postponed, then cancelled, in 2020 and 2021. As a result, this researcher was unable to conduct additional in-person meetings with the collective group but instead, continued with individual meetings with the program director and volunteer staff. However, these logistical details are pertinent and necessary to include in the study.

Table 3

Researcher Reflective Journal Themes

Researcher Reflective Journal Themes	
Motivation	Critical Race Theory
First-Generation Students	Resilience
Culture: African American Subculture	The Black Church/Community

Interviews

This study included 15 interviews with nine alumni participants, two volunteer staff, the program director and three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) admissions department staff. A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) was used to facilitate the interviews. Participants were initially asked a series of 12 questions. After the researcher

conducted the first two interviews, she refined the list by adding an additional four questions after realizing there was an emerging theme of students cultivating lasting relationships with both their fellow HBCU alumni and with fellow participants of the program that the researcher believed would be valuable information to include in the study. The researcher also learned that it would be valuable to get the perspective of students who attended an HBCU in comparison to students who attended predominantly White institutions and compare perceptions. As the program was established to expose students to HBCU's campus culture and because they cater to Black students in both the curriculum and faculty support, it was important to learn whether the Ascend College Readiness Program (ACRP) had an influence on their college choice. Finally, the researcher wanted to include information about the continued support the ACRP provides to students once accepted and attending college.

The four additional questions related to determining if and how (a) students who participated in the program continued to stay in contact with one another after completing the program; (b) students attended the program but decided to attend a predominantly White institution despite the program's goal of encouraging them to attend a Historically Black College or University; (c) whether living in Connecticut had an influence on the college they chose to attend; and (d) whether participating in ACRP had any influence or impact on them academically while in college?

The interview questions related to the alumni's experience on the college tour and on the HBCU campuses during the tour. Family, friends, or others influencing decisions to attend the college tour were also information collected, how they paid for the program tuition, if they attended a Historically Black College or University or predominantly White institution and, if so,

did the Ascend College Readiness Program influence these decisions? Participants were also asked for suggestions on improvements or modifications to the tour and the program’s curriculum. The 16 virtual interviews lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. Interviews were then transcribed from the video recordings.

Secondary Sources

The researcher used secondary source data for the study that consisted of artifacts from the Ascend College Readiness Program (See Table 4 below). Secondary source data was gathered and collected from the program director and participants including photos, videos and information about the program found on the internet.

Table 4

Secondary Source Data

Secondary Source Data
Program admissions application
Program budget: Annual program budget
Program website and social media pages: Photos, schedules, and college tour itinerary
Alumni participants’ artifacts

Data from the secondary source documents were then compared with the interviews, artifacts, and observation field notes which provided the data necessary to conduct this retrospective case study of the Ascend College Readiness Program. Analysis of these data strands allowed the researcher to triangulate and compare the data sources in order to determine the outcomes that could be attributed to the program (Wiley & Sons, 2015).

Data Analysis

Interviews

Participant interviews included nine former students of the program, three volunteer counselors, the program director, and three admissions counselors working at Historical Black College and Universities. The interviews were divided into subsets based on sampling data groups and coded for themes then cross-analyzed. The three subsets were the alumni of the program, program director, and admission counselors.

Coding Schema

According to Charmaz (2014), “grounded theory coding strategies can help fill gaps and holes in data from the earliest of stages of research” (p.118). Consequently, taking these additional steps to ensure the accuracy of data collected and interpretation of information can support the researcher’s goal of presenting an ethical disposition by increasing their credibility through these measures.

Utilizing the most popular form of grounded theory data collection, the researcher conducted open-ended interviews (Burke Johnson & Christensen, 2013). The researcher conducted an inductive qualitative case study and coding transcribed data collected through interviews. Until an emergent theory was developed, line-by-line coding technique was used and in vivo codes adopted directly from the data (Charmaz, 2014). “In vivo codes help us to preserve participants’ meanings of views and actions in the coding itself (Charmaz, 2014, p. 134).

Each participant was asked open-ended questions and interviewed for thirty to forty-five minutes by the researcher. Participants were given the latitude and encouraged to expand on their responses as they answered questions. Transcripts were then drafted by the researcher from each

recorded interview. The researcher coded data line-by-line using an inductive approach and categories were formed (Creswell, 2012). As themes emerged during the process of coding interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2000), data was recoded and following the similar procedures as Creswell. “Any disagreements we had about emergent categories, we returned to the verbatim data to again ascertain the participants” viewpoints and continued this process until we agreed on all categories (Creswell, 2012, p. 47).

Table 5

Coded Themes

Code	Definition
Success /Postgraduate studies	Participants in the ACRP graduated and went on to be successful
Positive Experience Acceptance/belonging HBCU	Participants identify experiences/reception received during interaction with peers during tour and during attendance at HBCU campus from other students, staff and faculty.
Negative Experience	Students negative experiences with the college tour and/or HBCU college experience
Support: Internal	Parents, Family
Support: External	The Church, The Community
Did not attend HBCU/Attended school in CT	Participant attended school in CT but never attended an HBCU prior to college tour
First-Generation	Students whose parents did not acquire a college degree
Move away from parents	Participants overarching goal was to move away from home and leave parent oversight
Had college options	Participants saw predominantly White institution as an option for college

Improvements to ACRP	Participants suggestions as improvements for the program to make it a better experience for participants. Based on their personal experience/ Program goals and suggestions from past participants
Limitations	Limitations of the participant and or program

Researcher’s Journal

An additional source of data is a journal where the researcher took notes while observing meetings and virtual admissions sessions, in addition to after participant interviews. The researcher’s journal serves as an added source of data that details the collection of data, course and schedule of study, and researcher reflections throughout the process. The journal will be summarized and compared to findings from the interviews and secondary data sources.

Artifacts

The researcher was able to collect secondary source artifacts that included both copies and electronic files of program forms, curriculum documents, and schedules. Also included were documents from the orientation package distributed to all students along with their welcome letter to the program. This is the first official correspondence parents and students receive for the program. Additionally, these artifacts provide a comprehensive view of the program.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The researcher documented the experiences of 16 participants including alumni of the Ascend College Readiness Program located in Connecticut (see Table 2). The program's mission is to inspire and educate high school students and their parents by introducing them to Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The program curriculum includes taking students on a six-day, multistate college campus tour and workshops to help students and their parents navigate through the college admissions process. The counselors in the program teach students and parents assist students with preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and with submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application.

Ascend College Readiness Program predicates their curriculum on the belief that Black students, especially first-generation, will be more successful in college at a Historically Black College or University. The Ascend College Readiness Program Executive Director established the college readiness program as an intervention to introduce first-generation Black high school and middle school students from the New England area to Historically Black Colleges and University campuses. These HBCU campuses are predominantly located in the southern states of the country. As a result of the campus tours, many students are introduced to the culture and history at HBCU campuses, in addition to experiencing regional cultural differences of the southern states of the country.

According to the program director, Ms. Eunice, "Ascend College Readiness Program curriculum consists of college tours to Historically Black Colleges or Universities to give these first-generation African American students exposure to a college experience that will make their transition a more manageable adjustment" (A. Eunice, personal communication, April 12, 2020).

Ms. Eunice subscribes to the notion that Black students will feel more comfortable on these college campuses with peers that have similar backgrounds and faculty that have experience and knowledge of the complex cultural issues these students face.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are known for their ability to educate African Americans and give them the full college experience while preparing them to compete in the national and global job market. Allen (1992) asserts African Americans who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities demonstrate greater satisfaction with their collegiate experience, academic achievement, and developmental gains when compared to those who attend predominantly White institutions.

This retrospective case study examined the Ascend College and Career Readiness Program and presents the views of participants on whether program meets the needs of first-generation, low-income and disadvantaged Black students on being admitted into Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The perspectives of the alumni participants, volunteer counselors, and program director provided an introspective overview of the thirty-year old program. The researcher was able to examine a full scope of the program by interviewing students from the first year of the program through the last academic year. Interviewing former participants that spanned over the thirty years of the program's existence presented a variety of educational and personal experiences as well as longitudinal and a robust range of information. Each participant brought their unique perspective that included familial context.

This chapter presents the results of the data collected and analyzed. Data strands collected including interview transcripts, researcher reflective journal, and artifacts from the program curriculum resulting in five emerging themes represented in Table 5. The surprising themes that

emerged through interviewing participants revealed the importance of The Black Church with The Black Community serving as external protective factors for these first-generation students. Additionally, a theme emerged concerning the continued post-graduate relationships amongst alumni of Historically Black Colleges and Universities when compared to graduates of predominantly White institutions. Finally, ‘Motivation’ through ‘Expectancy Value Theory’, ‘Resilience’ and ‘Sense of Belonging’ theories were supported by the findings.

Table 6

Emerging Themes

Emerging Themes	Definition
First-generation College Students:	First-generation college students are students whose parents did not attend college or attended college and did not graduate.
Sense of Belonging	A sense of belonging contributes to students’ ability to build relationships with peers, roommates, faculty, and staff. These relationships aid in students’ ability to transition and adjust. Also, a student’s sense of belonging contributes to their decision to stay or leave an institution

African American Sub-culture: The Black Church and The Black Community

Black culture and the influence of The Black Church has been studied by many scholars. Most cited in early works of W.E.B. DuBois who wrote about the Black experience within American.

Resilience

When a child survives living in a high-crime, low-income neighborhood and enrolls in college, we label that child resilient.

Motivation: Expectancy Value Theory

Based on the assumption that we are motivated to consciously make choices regarding the actions we take based on perceived outcomes associated with those actions and based on the perceived probability of obtaining the outcomes.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students are students whose parents did not attend college or attended college and did not graduate (Ramose, 2019).

According to Whitley Benson & Wesaw (2018), nearly 33% of college students in the United States are first-generation, but only 27% of first-generation will complete their degrees within four years. “The transition from high school to college can be difficult for first-generation students especially because they cannot look to their parents for guidance in navigating the

financial aid and college coursework” (Ramos, 2019, p. 56). Because these students did not grow up in a home with college-educated parents, they often lack adequate preparation and understanding of the college admissions process and campus culture, and many have financial limitations to cover tuition costs (Engle, 2007).

As a result, some first-generation college students attempt to start their college career at a local community college so they can stay close to home and work while in school. Studies show this ultimately may not be beneficial for first-generation students. “First-generation students have a better chance of acquiring a 4-year degree if they attend a 4-year institution instead of starting at a local community college” (Azmitia et al., 2018, p. 2). Consequently, some first-generation college students feel overwhelmed and unwelcome at school and guilty for leaving home (Stebbleton & Roria, 2005; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015) and as a result, may consider dropping out of school (Azmitia et al., 2018). However, according to Strayhorn (2019), Black, first-generation students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities feel a strong sense of belonging and receive support.

Sense of Belonging

The “sense of belonging” (Tinto, 2012) is one aspect of Tinto’s ‘Theory of Retention’ and is thought to be an essential key element and according to Strayhorn (2012) and essential need for students to be successful on a college campus. Tinto (2012) combined educational points of view with social psychologist ideals and believes a sense of belonging contributes to students’ ability to build relationships with peers, roommates, faculty and staff. These relationships aid in students’ ability to transition and adjust and as result, they have a better

chance of academic success (Lindeman, 1926). Also, a student's sense of belonging contributes to their decision to stay or leave an institution.

According to Tinto (2012), access to college has improved since 1990, but college retention has not significantly increased. Furthermore, an estimated 28% of millennial students leave college during their freshmen year (Braxton et al., 2013). Abel and Dietz (2014) examined financial burdens as a major factor of these students leaving school but according to Tinto's Theory of Retention, sense of belonging, could be a dominating key factor (1975).

Alumni students in the Ascend College Readiness Program shared their experience as first-generation college students and their feelings of a sense of belonging. Adaire (pseudonym for participant 6), said prior to participating in the Ascend College Readiness Program she knew nothing about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). She shared in her interview that she was not certain what college she would be attending and did not know anything about HBCUs. She said, "I knew absolutely nothing. We didn't have the "A Different World" or "School Daze" experience back then." A Different World was a television situation comedy on National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in the 1980s and 1990s that depicted African American students at a fictional historically Black college in Virginia. Prior to this spinoff of "The Cosby Show", there was no representation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities on television (Parrott-Sheffer, 2008). Additionally, "School Daze" was a movie released in 1988; written and directed by Spike Lee (2003). The film depicts Black students at a historically Black college (Shelton, 2015). For many first-generation college students without college graduates in their family, they learned about Historically Black Colleges and Universities by watching these depictions through fictional movie and television characters (Shelton, 2015).

Celia (pseudonym for participant 1) said, “there is something being taught in the HBCU curriculums that is not in Connecticut public schools. Even now, my son plays sports and it is not diverse. He plays baseball and there is not too many of us. Football may have more.”

Avery (pseudonym for participant 3) attended the Ascend College Readiness Program during its first year of taking students on college tours. He later attended a well-known historically Black university in Alabama and majored in Accounting. He describes his experience in the program as life-changing. “The tour of the HBCUs opened us up something that we did not think was tangible as inner-city kids. College was the furthest from my mind. After the first Black college experience, I got the itch.” Avery goes on to share the many options he had to attend predominantly White institutions but chose not to go. “I got offers to PWIs, including a prestigious school in Philadelphia, Miller University (pseudonym), but it wasn’t for this inner-city kid. Not here for it. I did not want to get lost in those classes and teachers not know me.”

Avery thought it was important to give back to the program by hosting the tour at his alma mater every year and giving participants a personal guided tour of his university. He continues to have relationships at the school and with fellow alumni. He said, “I made life-long friends that I talk to often. I interact with at least 15 alumni and my roommate daily. If we don’t talk, we text everyday...I can go to almost any major city and someone from my school will say I’m coming to get you.”

In contrast, Adaire shared her regret of not attending an HBCU. “I went to college based on my major. I regret not going to an HBCU – I wanted to pledge a sorority.” When describing her experience on the college campus tours, she said, “Other than family, I never been around

this many Black people. I was like wow!” She then continues describing her total education experience in contrast to attending an HBCU and having Black teachers. “Imagine being in a classroom that you’re not the only one...I had one Black professor for graduate school and a Black teacher for a month in third grade because I left Montessori school for a month due to transportation issues but returned.”

Adaire shared that she hoped her children could have the college experience that she did not. “My daughter had her first Black teacher in college at a New England state university.” Her two children (fraternal twins) attended predominantly White grade schools in Fairfield County, Connecticut. She shared that her son was not interested in attending a Historically Black College or University, but her daughter applied to one of the first established HBCUs, founded in 1867 in Washington, D.C. (Logan, 1969). “I called every day and finally got an envelope weeks later...she threw the acceptance letter in the trash.” She describes this as a disappointing experience because she wanted her daughter to attend a Historically Black College or University but because they follow a different time schedule than predominantly White institutions, students like Adaire’s daughter may decide not to wait for a response to their admissions application submission and instead attend a PWI.

Some participants admitted to not having any prior knowledge or experience with Historically Black Colleges and Universities. For most, the first time on the HBCU campuses were with the Ascend College Readiness Program guided campus tours. Some define their experience as life changing. Tiana (pseudonym for participant 5) describes it as “Wow!” She describes the first day of the college campus tour to the researcher as different. “Even the first day on campus, the atmosphere was different than anything I had ever seen. In Romilton

(Pseudonym for a town in Connecticut) when you see Black people, there's a stigma. They [community at HBCUs] try to push past the stigma." She continues to say, "because of my talks with my teacher, I want to study abroad. There are lot of opportunities in college. School pushes you to be great...Get out and explore." This speaks to both Sense of Belonging and Expectancy Value Theory (EVT). EVT will be discussed in detail later in the study.

When asked whether Adaire, thought she could have the opportunities she speaks of at a predominantly White instituting as those at a Historically Black College or University, she responded, "Black teachers understand you on a different level. Not only were they looking at me as a student or someone you have to teach, but as a person." She shares this in comparison to her high school experience. "Jewvett Whyler (Pseudonym for interdistrict multi-magnet high school) Interdistrict High School was predominantly White. Teachers would try but they didn't have the time. Didn't understand the area you live in impacts how you learn. Most teachers were from suburban and affluent towns. I felt like an outsider at Jewvett Whyler."

Yvonne (pseudonym for participant 9), believes her life would be different if she had attended a predominantly White institution instead of a historically Black university. She attended a historically Black university in Virginia that is considered one of the more prestigious HBCUs and speaks to the Sense of Belonging and the Black sub-culture as a student and graduate. She also asserts that after graduating from a historically Black university in the south, she could not imagine living and raising her children in New England.

Yvonne said:

There is a lack of diversity and people like us doing as well as they could be doing. My life would be different if I hadn't gone to an HBCU. People stay connected. Others may

have one or two friends but HBCU grads stay connected and go hard for each other. My husband is also an alumnus from my alma mater. We met ten years later at homecoming.

In contrast to many of the experiences shared by alumni participants, Etta (pseudonym for participant 8), had a different perspective concerning her experience in the program and college campus tour. Unlike most of the other students interviewed, she felt like an outsider amongst the other students because she attended a private school in a neighboring affluent town. As a result of not knowing any of the students, she initially felt disconnected. Etta shared”

-I actually raised the money myself to go on the tour. As a junior in high school, I wanted to go that bad. I was desperate, so I started raising my own money. I just wrote a letter and I gave it to people, and they gave me money to help me. Once I got on the tour, it was cliquey. There's a social element that is hard for some of us and it's hard when you go away with people. I remember experiencing that as part of the group it was the popular kids like they were in high school together and then unpopular kids standing on the outside. The chaperones should take note and once they're on a trip, be mindful or even actually before the trip, try to make sure that doesn't happen -- that the kind of idea. I think making a concerted effort should be done. The lion's share of the participants are from Stamford schools, so others are like outsiders. You know we separate ourselves and choose the groups that we're most comfortable identifying with. Being aware of this and creating an atmosphere of we're all in this together would help students who participant in the program from outside the traditional public schools in the district.

Black Sub-Culture: The Black Church and The Black Community

All the participants in this study were Black students who participated in the Ascend College Readiness Program. Interviews with the alumni participants revealed the influence of this sub-culture within the Black community – The Black Church. “The Black church is a faith-based organization that has a rich, culturally significant history in the U.S. for its multifaceted function in the lives of African Americans” (Stuckey, 2013, p. 167). The Black Church has historically had significance in the Black community since slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and still has a respectable reputation for its advocacy for the lives of African Americans (Stuckey, 2013).

The Black [African American] Community is not classified by particular streets or neighborhoods but the sub-culture that defines African American cultural and heritage (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). According to Roberts (1980), the African American community is comprised of three institutions: family, church, and school. This holistic perspective of these three social institutions and their influence on values in the Black community were studied in depth by notable African American scholar, W.E.B. Du Bois (1898).

Du Bois asserts in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that there is a “Twoness” for Blacks in America where they wear a metaphorical “veil” that enables them to navigate between the White world and the Black world (Lemert, 1994). Du Bois believed that Blacks must not internalize Whites' attitudes but instead cultivate a reflexive perspective on Twoness (Blau & Brown, 2001) and thus there is a Black sub-culture often referred to as The Black Community.

Through coding for themes, the researcher found that many of the program alumni attributed their introduction to the program via relationships established at their church. Celia

stated that her mother met the program director, Ms. Eunice, at the church through ministries they participated in together and enlisted her and her sister to participate by volunteering them to participate. “I volunteered at events when I was young for non-profits and church events with Ms. Eunice...by us going to Gregory Baptist Church (pseudonym) we did a lot of things with that too – I was in the choir and junior missionary ministry, so we always did something. We always volunteered. My mom made it mandatory. “

Yvonne spoke of her mother’s influence and connection to their church as the catalyst that caused her to participate in the Ascend program and attend the annual college campus trip. She said, “My mom definitely pushed me to go. She and Ms. Eunice were good friends and knew each other from church.” While Emma (pseudonym for participant 7) admitted that although she attended a private high school in a different city than where she lived and the location of the program, she learned about it from parents not peers. She said her parents’ friends introduced her to Ms. Eunice, the program director. She was known as a leader in the community and very active in her church. And although her parents did not know Ms. Eunice personally, she had a cousin who attended, and Ms. Eunice had a reputation of taking students on these trips and getting them into college. She said after participating in the program, her parents told her, “We know you’re going to college...now how are we going to do this?” She added that before the trip it did not seem possible.

Tiana had a similar experience of her parents telling her she was going to attend the Ascend College Readiness Program. It was partially due to Ms. Eunice’s reputation in the community but also because her older cousin was one of the counselors in the program. She said

her mother felt comfortable with allowing her to attend the college campus tours because she had someone to watch over her.

When the researcher asked Avery why he participated in the Ascend College Readiness Program he answered, “The church...Friends at church influenced my decision to go. Ms. Eunice was known in the church and the community and she told my mother I could be the first child in my family to graduate from college.”

When Avery was asked why she participated in the Ascend College Readiness Program, she answered, “my parents...anytime women in the church approached my mother to have me do something, my mother would say, you’re going...it’s not an option. With the Ascend Program, she said, you’re going as soon as I get the money together.”

Adaire shared she participated in the Ascend College Readiness Program because she did not attend public school with students in her neighborhood but went to a private parochial school and attended Montessori school as a young child. Her mother knew Ms. Eunice. “I felt safe as a freshman girl on the trip. There was such respect for Ms. Eunice...Alicia (Ms. Eunice’s first name) had the respect first. Everything was so organized. Could’ve been things happening behind the scenes but I couldn’t tell. Only remember Ms. Eunice having the respect of students.”

Adaire went on to say she was invited over twenty years later to receive an award at the annual Ascend College Readiness Program Banquet. “It was like heaven.” When asked does she stay in contact with alumni from her predominantly White institution, she says, only the Black alumni. “I spoke to some of my fellow Black alumni today and interact with them most. The others (White alumni), just via ‘Likes’ on Facebook posts.” The researcher asked Adaire if she

pledged (join a Black Greek-letter organization), she said, “I didn’t want to because it couldn’t compare to experience of those at an HBCU.”

Resilience

Research has shown that family poverty and its associated problems impact children’s ability to perform academically and can lead to delinquency (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Sigma, 1995). This can further have an adverse impact on their adult life, ultimately causing marital and occupational problems (Condly, 2006). Then there are those that strive “in spite of the most adverse circumstances, some children manage to survive and even thrive, academically and socially into adulthood” (Condly, 2006, p. 211). These are the resilient (Condly, 2006, p. 213). “Research has shown that resilient adults typically attribute their status to a dogged determinism, held throughout childhood, that they would conquer their circumstances, that they were people of worth and value, and that they had the inner resources to succeed” (Condly, 2006, pp. 218-219).

Participants in this study exhibited resilience when sharing their personal and academic experiences during their interviews. All the participants were Black, first-generation students whose parents did not attend college. Six of the nine alumni participants were from single-parent homes and although they had desires to attend college, were uncertain how they could due to financial limitations. Despite their financial limitations, academic and non-academic challenges, many showed resilience.

Celia, describes the challenges she and her sister faced financially despite coming from a two-parent home, “...funding is an issue. It is for families. Funding is definitely a hindrance. It is so hard for those of us that didn’t come from money. They make education so expensive. Once you get a bachelors degree you can no longer qualify for financial aid.”

Robin-Lynne, (pseudonym for participant 2) initially attended a Historically Black University. She explained her experience starting at an HBCU as the following:

It wasn't because I always wanted to go to an HBCU but because I wanted to get out of my mother's house. I went to a small HBCU in South Carolina. I partied because it was my first taste of freedom. I practically flunked out, so my mother made me come home. Once back home, I got pregnant and knew I wanted something different for my life, so I enrolled in the local community college. My plan was to always be a nurse, but I didn't take I seriously until it wasn't just me. After graduating from community college, I graduated with an associate degree in Nursing and enrolled at a competitive private university's Nursing program 15 minutes from my home to get my bachelor's degree.

When the researcher asked Robin-Lynne to explain why she thought she had more success attending the community college, Robin-Lynne explained that her new responsibility as a mother fueled her desire to succeed. In addition, she said:

The HBCU I attended in South Carolina didn't stand out to me during the tour. I knew I couldn't get into one of the larger HBCUs. It wasn't about going to an HBCU for me, it was about getting out of the house. I would've gone to a university in Connecticut if I thought I could get in. I knew I wanted to go into Nursing and the community college I attended had a Nursing program that was second to the ivy league down the road. I then transferred to a local private university to get my bachelor's degree and am currently two classes away from my master's degree.

The researcher asked Robin-Lynne whether she thought attending the Ascend College Readiness Program prepared her for college and pursuit of her degree? Robin-Lynne felt strongly that her path worked in her favor and that attending a predominantly White institution helped her attain her career goals better than if she stayed at a Historically Black College or University.

I believe when entering into White-dominated fields one should be educated on the level the PWIs are on. The quality of education at an HBCU versus a PWI is that all my professors have Ph.Ds. versus Ed.Ds and master degrees. Because of the networking, I can get in any hospital and make \$100,000 a year. The program was not beneficial for me. I do not think it prepares you enough. I think there should be more individualized attention. It is one thing to go to school – it is another thing to graduate. Schools want your money and our [Black] students aren't aware of cost associated with attending college. The [Ascend] program should help more with scholarships and stay connected with students after applying.

Similar to Robin-Lynne, Etta, did not attend a Historically Black College or University but showed resilience in her pursuit of her education as a first-generation college student who was raised in affordable housing and bussed to a private, suburban school. Etta shared that her experience at the small, private predominantly White institution she attended in the North East part of the country was not the best experience, but it was what she was used to experiencing because of her grade school experience. She shares that the campus was not diverse and the university did not do much to help students of color feel welcome. What she is describing is lack of a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment and this contributed to why she withdrew.

“I didn’t have support at school. I wasn’t told anything about tutoring or other resources like counseling. And even though my family wasn’t near, they never checked on me. Junior year I withdrew. I worked for a bit then transferred to Cauthen Community College (pseudonym) and completed my bachelor’s degree at one of the state universities.

Motivation

There are many theories of motivation. Conley’s (2007) definition speaks to the level of preparation a student needs and includes non-academic guidance and support that is essential to success once matriculated at an institution. In the context of this case study, expectancy value theory frames the motivation of alumni due to their value placed on their perceived probability of success if they graduate with a 4-year degree.

Robin-Lynne shared her motivation and resilience to go back to school after failing during her freshmen year at an HBCU in South Carolina. When faced with the sobering reality of becoming a mother, she enrolled into a local community college and attained a degree in Nursing. Having the responsibility of being a parent motivated her to complete her degree and continue to attain a master’s in Nursing.

Tiana explained during her interview that although she was a first-generation student, she had four older siblings that graduated from college. Despite this, she says, her parents offered little help. When asked who motivated her, her response was “I did. Neither parent pushed me. My siblings went to college and all went to predominantly White institutions.” Her siblings and Ms. Eunice, the program director of the Ascend College Readiness Program, helped her most with admissions applications and the FAFSA.

Tiana said her fifth-grade teacher motivated her...and she wanted to be different from her siblings. Her fifth-grade teacher, Dr. Bennett (a pseudonym) was a Black teacher who attended a historically Black university in St. Petersburg, Virginia. Tiana shared details she learned about Dr. Bennett’s college experience and it being an inspiration for her to want to attend a Black school. Tiana said, “Dr. Bennett gave us an assignment to research HBCUs and to do a project presentation. He told us that his experience at college shaped him into who he is today and, as a bonus, he invited his school choir to visit the school.”

Expectancy Value Theory

Tolman (1959) first defined the theoretical foundation that expectancy model is built on based on the assumption that we consciously make choices regarding the actions we take based on perceived outcomes associated with those actions, and based on the perceived probability of obtaining the outcomes. Vroom (1964) uses the variables Expectancy, Instrumentality, and Valence to frame the theory. Table 6 below illustrates how expectancy, instrumentality, and valence can be applied to education and this study specifically.

Table 7
Expectancy, Instrumentality and Valence

	Real World	Education
Expectancy	The idea that increasing the amount of effort will increase performance	If I attend the right school, I will do well and graduate
Instrumentality	If you perform better, your desired outcome will be achieved	If I work hard in school, I will graduate with a college degree

Valence	The perceived value one puts on the outcome	Graduation from college will improve my quality of life and circumstances
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Adaire describes her experience after attending the college tour:

I remember coming back from the college tour feeling worthy. I remember coming back feeling like this is where I'm supposed to be. I came home knowing I wanted to go to a 4-year school and get out of my environment and do something for myself. I lived in the projects and we didn't have very much. It's like that helped me see that if you get out of there - if you get out of Maycomb (pseudonym) and out of your environment, that you could potentially change. I remember that being a feeling; that I have to go to college and that's how to get out of my environment. I was running from something rather than running toward something.

Robin-Lynne had a similar perspective concerning her initial motivation for going on the trip with the Ascend Program. It was wanting to leave home and college providing the means to do so. As a first-generation college student, she explains her parent's feeling conflicted due to wanting her to go to college but not knowing how to provide the support or knowledge needed to go. She describes her situation as, "my parents wanted me to go to college but didn't know how to raise a college-ready student. I didn't want any parts of school or academics but wanted to get out the house."

Robin-Lynne, describes her experience, despite not being interested in college and how participating in the Ascend College Readiness Program changed her perspective. However, according to her, the program did not influence her to attend an Historically Black College or

University (HBCU) as much as the desire to get out of her parents' house and thinking it would be easier to get into an HBCU. She also thought it would please her parents if she attended an HBCU. She applied to a small HBCU in South Carolina, because she had little faith that she would get accepted into one of the larger, more prominent HBCUs. "I knew I couldn't get into Howard. It wasn't about going to an HBCU but getting out of the house. I would've gone somewhere in Connecticut."

Robin-Lynne, like many students, did not return to school after her freshman year. She transferred to a local community college in New England to pursue a degree in Nursing and later completed both her bachelor's and master's degrees at a private, predominantly White institution (PWI). She believes it is important to attend a PWI when entering into what she describes as a 'competitive field'. "I believe when entering into White-dominated fields, one should be educated on the level they are on." In this context she was referring to the field of Nursing.

Multiple themes emerged when interviewing Ahmad (pseudonym for participant 4). Ahmad explained his challenges with getting into college without the benefit of the support of his parents. As a first-generation student he was not only limited on knowledge about the college admissions process, but he also had no support from his family. His parents were not in favor of him going to college and were very vocal about their thoughts of his pursuing admission. Ahmad said, "My extended family and friends in high school supported me going to school. My parents struggled financially and didn't value college or support me going on the college tour trip. My uncle and godfather went on the trip when they were younger." Although his immediate family did not have an influence on his desire to attend college, extended family and community members acted as external protective factors and provided the support he felt he needed.

During Ahmad's interview 'Resilience' and 'Motivation' are two themes that emerged. Unlike the participants who had parents and family that supported their desire to attend college, Ahmad's parents and brother did not support him. They also told him if he went to college, they did not want him to go out of state. "I don't blame my parents for not knowing about college and being uncomfortable. I have a twin brother who is not into school and didn't go on the trip."

Ahmad believed attending college would change his circumstances despite not having family support which confirms 'Expectancy Value Theory'. Ahmad said, "It was hurtful for people who care about you to doubt you. My mother complained about paperwork, but my thought was, when I do better, you'll want me to help you." He goes on to share that his father also tried to discourage him from attending college, "My father told me, 'you can't make honor roll'. I did it to prove him wrong. Whenever someone tells me I can't do something, I do it – whatever I set my mind to do."

Ahmad gave his advice for other first-generation students with similar circumstances, "Don't believe when people tell you what you can't do." He also shared his advice for family, "Never tell a young person what they can't do, especially because you have no money." He goes on to explain that he wants to break his level of poverty, specifically living in subsidized housing. He said, "My grandmother lived here. My mother lived here. Do I have to live here?"

Ahmad states the importance of friends and extended family supporting him that he did not receive from his immediate family; confirming the value of external protective factors when there is a void of internal protective factors. "It really takes a village. My uncle [Avery, participant 3] went to a historically Black university in Alabama. He offered support and sent

money. Ahmad said, “just because you don’t get the love where you’re supposed to get it, doesn’t mean you should over-look where you are getting it.”

Similar to Adaire, Ahmad described his motivation to want to experience college life at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) based on “A Different World” television show that aired on NBC in the 1980s and 1990s (Parrott-Sheffer, 2008). He described the ‘Sense of Belonging’ that was shared among the college students depicted in the fictional historically Black college, ‘Hillman College’. Ahmad said, “I wanted my college experience to be like that...find love and friends. You find a lot in the HBCU experience. I met a girl who was beautiful and told her, you’re going to be my girlfriend someday and now she is my girlfriend.”

He also describes the diversity within Black, African American culture. Ahmad said, “I met Black people from Hawaii and California who had different experiences. Military kids...engaged in conversations about our different experiences.” He explained that one of his friends has never been to a rough neighborhood. He said not only has the experience built close relationships with students at his school, but he also has relationships with students from the Ascend College Readiness Program, including his best female friend who attends a private historically Black university in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Ahmad shared that the supportive members of his extended family all attended and most graduated from Historically Blacks Colleges and Universities: South Carolina State University, St. Augustine College, Tuskegee University, Johnson C. Smith University, and Florida A&M University. Additionally, he received support from the director of the housing development where he lived who knew of his financial challenges and burden of responsibility, he felt towards his family. Ahmad said, “Benita Lee (a pseudonym) pulled me to the side and told me to just go

away...everyone will be ok. The more you're there for people, the more they rely on you and become dependent.”

It is important to add context to the role Ahmad played in his family and impact of his going to college out of state would have on his family unit. Ahmad worked part-time while in high school to help his mother. His mother was a single parent of three children and even though his father was in his life, he was not in the household. Ahmad said:

I worked making \$500 every two weeks to help my mother. I saved \$550 for school. On college ‘Decision Day’ (May 1st), I was nervous and called my uncle. He told me to trust God. I called Cuda University (pseudonym for an HBCU in Tennessee) and told an Admission’s counselor my story. I still didn’t hear back. I sent the deposit without receiving an ‘Acceptance Letter’. I would ask my mother every day about a letter from Cuda. I noticed my mother had a letter in her shredder pile of old mail. I opened the letter and immediately got excited. I threw the letter in the air and told my family, I got in! The same people that told me I couldn’t go to college were now congratulating me...my uncle told the family, ‘if Ahmad doesn’t make it, it’s because you failed him’.

When speaking to Ahmad about his experience with the Ascend College Readiness Program, he said Eugene Barry (a pseudonym), the male counselor in the program, was his mentor. He taught him what he describes as the same ‘Cuda Gentleman’ skills during the college campus tours trip. Ahmad said, “Cuda has the same values Eugene Barry taught me. Ladies would not touch a thing. I also learned, our image is our strength. What resonated most is men must wear ties and good relationships can take you far.” When asking about the reference of

ladies not touching a thing, he explained the male participants loaded the ladies' luggage on and off the bus.

Ahmad spoke of other lessons gained from participating in the Ascend College Readiness Program:

Ms. Eunice helped by sending my mother scholarship information because we didn't have a telephone and Mr. Barry checks on me here at school. I didn't start my freshmen year at my school in Alabama. I started at the local community college then transferred here. Teachers at predominantly White institutions do not care about you like teachers at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. I didn't know this at the time of the [Ascend] tour, but after attending Cauthen (a pseudonym) Community College and it was then confirmed once I attended an HBCU.

Ahmad indicated that he chose to attend the HBCU in Alabama because his supportive uncle, Avery, attended that school. He said, "I looked back at photos I had taken during the trip and saw that the only photos taken were of Cuda University. I was also drawn towards the Black universities in Atlanta and accepted to 15 HBCUs, but I believe the school picks the student."

The researcher interviewed the Ascend program's director, three volunteer counselors and three staff from Admissions and Student Affairs at HBCUs. The information shared during these interviews gave an additional perspective to the program's curriculum and the HBCU culture.

According to Alicia Eunice, the program director of the Ascend College Readiness Program, each student who attends her program becomes a member of her family. She considers

each student one of her children and understands that their parents entrust her with them. She describes the Ascend College Readiness Program as providing an opportunity for students to learn and gain access to college. As a longstanding member of the Black community and her church, she knows of the factors that contribute to the barriers that the students in in her program face. Ms. Eunice said, “I educate participants in the program about the process of enrolling into college and providing access to college for over 30 years. My long-term vision for the children, adults and families in my community is to provide opportunities to introduce first-generation African American students to historically Black colleges and universities.”

Ms. Eunice describes the services the Ascend College Readiness Program provides as the exposure Black, first-generation students [African American in particular] need to Historically Black Colleges and Universities. She said:

I want to give my students the same opportunity I was given. I visited Shepard University (a pseudonym) with a church group when I was younger and had a life-changing experience. I felt at home and am a proud alumnus of Shepard [University]. When you walk across a campus you know this is your home...this is where you want to be.

The researcher asked Ms. Eunice to explain the admissions process for her program.

He response was that:

Applications are completed by student participants, their parents and accompanied with a letter of recommendation from their guidance counselor or principal. Students who submit applications by the deadline and meet the criteria are sent acceptance letters and admissions packets. Forty students are selected. We typically have a waitlist every year. Criteria includes having an 85% attendance record in school and a Grade Point Average

(GPA) of 3.0 for Freshmen, 2.5 for Sophomores and Juniors, and 2.0 for Seniors. The program admissions packet includes forms that must be completed and information explaining important dates and costs for the college campus tour. The cost of the trip is \$800 for each student. The \$800 covers the all travel, lodging and meals.

The researcher asked Ms. Eunice to explain whether students who are from families that cannot afford \$800 are able to participate in the program?

We receive scholarships from organizations that support the program and individual donors that want to sponsor students so they can have this opportunity. Having a certain GPA is a requirement and also helps students get scholarships for local groups to sponsor them. It lets them know they are taking this seriously. Churches, sororities and fraternities, local businesses and community groups have been known to sponsor kids for the program.

The researcher asked Ms. Eunice what are some of the modifications she has made to the program over the past 30 years? Ms. Eunice explained that she learned to add variety to the itinerary by rotating the schools visited each year and learn from student surveys at the conclusion of the tours if they felt the tours have provided them with enough exposure and opportunity to learn about each campus visited. She said, “Each student is given a notebook to take notes throughout the tour and is required to submit an essay at the conclusion of the tour. Each room of students is required to write twenty questions to be asked during guided campus tours”. She also explained that the added programs and workshops with students throughout the year that include financial aid and scholarship workshops. “Students are given a packet that

includes 101 scholarship applications. We also do activities as a group. We take two busses of students to the annual Great Debate between Howard and Harvard students.”

She continued to discuss logistical modifications, “We used to stay at different hotels but have found it feasible and more accommodating to stay at one hotel chain throughout the tour. This chain of hotels provides breakfast and the rooms are large enough to accommodate quads - four students per room. This hotel chain is much more convenient and the students like it.”

The researcher thought it was important to include the modifications to the program over the past year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Eunice said, “We postponed the college campus tours and arranged for virtual information sessions with admissions counselors at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities that would have been stops along the 2020 scheduled college campus tour.” Ms. Eunice explained that it was important to give students the opportunity to ask the questions they would have had the opportunity to ask during the campus visits. According to Ms. Eunice, every school was not prepared to conduct the virtual information sessions in April but, as the pandemic continued, more schools started conducting virtual info sessions and virtual new student orientations. The researcher participated in three virtual admissions sessions with the Ascend College Readiness Program participants to learn whether these sessions have the same wealth of information as the college campus tours.

According to Kelly (a pseudonym), a volunteer counselor for the Ascend College Readiness Program, “the benefits of the peer interaction gained by students participating in our program is unmatched by virtual meetings.” Tiana, describes the value of Ms. Eunice introducing her to alumni of the program that were attending the historically Black university in Virginia that was her ultimate school. Tiana said, “Ms. Eunice got me information in advance of visiting the

campus and introduced me to other students who were going to the school. The students who were at Henry University (a pseudonym for HBCU in Virginia) and other HBCUs that were the most help.” Tiana continued to speak about what she felt was most memorable about her participating in the Ascend College Readiness Program, “Just being with other students that had the same goals...we kept in touch with most students that ended up going to HBCUs. The connections made...people were welcoming. The chaperones kept in touch with me. They made sure students did well - their best. It felt like family.”

Admissions counselors at Historically Black Colleges and Universities scheduled virtual information sessions for the Ascend College Readiness Program participants via virtual platforms. Students were invited by Ms. Eunice directly and via social media to register to attend. These virtual workshops served as a substitute for the in-person campus tours. Even though students were given the opportunity to virtually meet with admissions staff in a small group that was only open to Ascend College Readiness Program to speak with admissions staff directly, it could not replace the experience of being on campus. Visiting the college campus, interacting with students both on the college campuses and throughout the tour, is a vital aspect of the program.

In contrast, according to staff interviewed at HBCU’s, they assert that virtual admissions information sessions and new student orientations have not negatively impacted student interest. According to Mr. Smith (a pseudonym), Director of Admissions at an HBCU located in Alabama, “I am amazed by the level of interest we are still receiving. Students and parents are calling to confirm that we are opening for the fall semester.”

The Vice-President of Enrollment Management, Ms. Martine (a pseudonym), at a popular historically Black university in North Carolina said she has had to recruit Student Affairs staff to help answer phones and emails in the Admissions Department. Ms. Martine said:

There has been an overwhelming amount of calls and emails from both new students and our current students. New students are eager to know the status of their admissions applications and whether the campus will be open this upcoming fall semester. Our current students just want to know when they can move back on campus.

However, Mr. Royce (a pseudonym), the Director of Admissions at an HBCU in Georgia said regarding new student applicants, “We’re not where we want to be, but happy where we are considering the current state of affairs. We currently don’t have students on campus. We are eager to have them back and they’re eager to return.”

The researcher asked the Ms. Eunice, program director, what makes the Ascend College Readiness Program different or unique compared to other college readiness programs? Ms. Eunice explained that her program has been consistent for 30 years and she has the support of the community and her former students. The program does not receive public grants or funding. The parents and community have supported her for the past 30 years. She said, “Alumni who move out of state send their children to the annual college campus tour with me. They trust me. I teach my students responsibility and life lessons. I tell their parents, I do not travel with bond money” and expects the students to behave and act accordingly on the trip. She does not plan for any issues while traveling with students. She said:

Everybody has responsibilities - girls keep the bus clean and boys carry the luggage.

Students have a 6am wake-up call every morning and anyone nodding-off during campus presentations makes everyone miss out on a surprise activity or special event planned for later that day. Everyone is dressed in professional attire. Boys have to wear white shirts and ties.

Ms. Eunice explained that white shirts were not always a requirement but felt it looked more professional. During her interview she told the researcher about Mr. Barry oftentimes being the first man to teach the boys how to tie a tie. She said:

These are rules and life lessons that will benefit them in the future. They learn time management and money management. They are also told during the mandatory parent meeting before the tour that we do not tolerate discipline issues. Students will respect our rules. No cell phones during presentations or they will be taken. There is a curfew in the hotel throughout the trip and they will tip the driver. We expect the students to conduct themselves in a respectful and professional manner.

Ms. Eunice also wanted to ensure it was understood that she understands there are students who may not meet the program's criteria but have the desire to go to college. She explains that she provides support and advocates for those students as well by speaking with school guidance counselors. She said, "I have a student who had a 1.7 GPA in high school and is now attending Livingston College and is a senior with a 3.4 GPA." She added that she checks in to learn of the progress of students. She also does not solely rely on community and church

relationships and affiliations to recruit students to her program, she personally delivers information to schools to ensure it reaches students.

The interviews with nine alumni participants, the program director, three volunteer counselors, and three members of Historically Black College and University Admissions staff, revealed the following themes, ‘Sense of Belonging’ which fits within the framework of Tinto’s Theory of Retention, addition to, ‘Expectancy Value Theory using Motivation and Resilience’, first-generation college students and Black sub-culture: The Black Church and The Black Community.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Results

This retrospective case study viewed a college readiness program located in the gold coast of Connecticut through the lens of 16 participants that included former program participants, the program director, volunteer counselors, and the researcher.

Although the program's mission is to introduce students to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in an effort to encourage them to attend these institutions, all of the participants did not enroll in HBCUs. Some of the participants enrolled at predominantly White institutions or initially enrolled at HBCUs and learned it was not the ideal environment for them. Each shared their experience both as a participant in the Ascend College Readiness Program and as a first-year college student.

The researcher set out to answer three research questions:

1. Do participants in the study perceive the exposure to college provided by the Ascend College Readiness Program and in particular to Historically Black Colleges and Universities successfully prepared students (and their parents) for the college admissions process
2. Do students who attended the Ascend College Readiness Program actually attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities as a result of participating in the program
3. Do students who attend(ed) Historically Black Colleges and Universities perceive they transitioned well socially and academically into their postsecondary institution

The study revealed that the Ascend College Readiness Program prepared participants for the admissions process and the participants who graduated from a Historically Black College or University, they transitioned into college well. However, not all participants enrolled in and

graduate from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The study revealed that although some participants did not transition well at an HBCU or attended a predominantly White institution, they all showed resilience and had the motivation to continue and eventually attained a bachelor's degree. It is important to note that participants that enrolled in a Historically Black College or University, and remained matriculated without transferring, followed a traditional track and earned a bachelor's degree within four to five years. In contrast, students who initially enrolled in an HBCU and transferred to a predominantly White institution or enrolled in a White institution after high school, did not follow a traditional track of earning a bachelor's degree within four to five years after graduating high school.

This research was conducted through the lens of Critical Race Theory, in addition to Resilience, Motivation and Expectancy Value theories. Additional theories that emerged throughout the study were Sense of Belonging and Cultural Environment Model Theory on college campuses. The study also revealed the continued influence of external protective factors such as The Black Church and The Black Community.

The Ascend College Readiness Program has been in existence for over 30 years without the help of annual public funding in the form of external funders such as government-sponsored grants or private financing from corporate sponsors. Former participants of the program, the local community, non-profit organizations, civic groups and Black churches have all contributed time, resources and funding to keep this program operating.

A goal of the study is to make Black, first-generation students a central part of the conversation when discussing college readiness, enrollment, recruitment, the first-year college experience, and college mentorship programs. Additionally, there have been many discussions

regarding minority teacher recruitment specifically in Connecticut and by both education decisionmakers and policymakers. These discussions are focused on the limited amount of Black male teachers, teachers of color and teachers that mirror many of the inner-city public schools' student population.

Connecticut has one of the largest achievement gaps in the country and as a result suffers vast disparities and inequities amongst public school districts. These academic factors are important to the preparation of public school students so that they are equipped with the necessary skills to perform and compete at the college level. However, non-academic factors are equally as important in particular for first-generation students. Non-academic factors including family support, financial limitations, understanding of the college admissions process and college campus culture, contribute to student success. Moreover, research has shown that students feeling a sense of belonging on their college campus both socially and academically has the greatest impact on student success and retention.

According to the participants in this study, college readiness programs like the Ascend College Readiness Program are essential to introduce first-generation students to college options available especially to those that they may not have been previously exposed prior to participating in the program. For example, the researcher spoke with staff from historically Black universities concerning their recruitment efforts in the north east region of the country and they admitted to not having the resources to actively recruit that far north. Ms. Martíne said, “We have been considering recruiting in New England and Upstate New York after we got word that billboards were posted in Schenectady, New York and in the New England area by HBCUs from Atlanta and Alabama.”

Most HBCUs are in the southern part of the country and they do not generally recruit beyond New York. HBCU admissions staff interviewed told the researcher that they rely on alumni, Black professional organizations and Black Greek-Letter Organizations to assist them in their efforts. Therefore, programs like the Ascend College Readiness Program are filling in the gap of information available about Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Furthermore, they are going a step further by bringing the students to HBCU campuses.

A review of the literature revealed that there are limited studies about programs that specifically target Black, first-generation college students and none that focus on New England specifically and discuss the parallels between Black students and their White peers in the gold coast of Connecticut. Black students in this region of the state are attending school with affluent, White students who are typically not suffering from the same non-academic barriers they are but are then expected to compete at the same level. “Race amplifies the effects of poverty...Race provides privileges and it denies privileges in a very, very real way” (St. Amour, 2020, n.p.).

The majority of participants in the study shared their feelings of acceptance and sense of belonging while visiting the Historically Black Colleges and Universities during the Ascend College Readiness Program campus tour. Information gathered from participant interviews reveal a need for additional college readiness programs for [Black] first-generation students. These students would benefit from an additional focus of introducing them to colleges with ‘culturally engaging campus environments’ and where students have a sense of belonging (Museus et al, 2017).

Literature also revealed that college readiness programs that include an overnight experience similar to overnight summer camps have an impact on college preparedness and influences

college success (Whittington & Garst, 2018). Also, research shows that summer camp influences future choices for career and college due to the camp experience influencing students' perseverance that ultimately supported their future success (Whittington & Garst, 2018; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Limitations

Gender Disparities

According to a report from the Thurgood Marshall Scholarship Fund, women constitute more than 60% of African American enrollment at the 45 public Historically Black College and Universities (Geiger, 2006). There is limited research that focusses on the disparities between Black female and Black male students enrolling and graduating with bachelor's degrees.

According to The National Center for Education Statistics, graduation data from Historically Black Colleges and Universities report that African American male students lag significantly behind African American female students (2009). The disparity of Black males enrolling in college when compared to their female counterparts was evident in the Ascend College Readiness Program. Avery said he noticed more girls participating in the program but said, "Girls are going to go to school. It is expected so no one notices it." Adaire said, "The girls were more focused than the boys when I participated in the program."

Family Support and Financial Limitations

The majority of the participants in the study expressed concerns about financial limitations as a barrier to attending college. Lack of support from family and friends at home, compared to other students at school, can cause first-generation college students to feel abandoned and without the encouragement they may desperately need to do well in school.

Ahmad shared that he did not receive support from his family including his twin brother. His father was not supportive and lacked confidence in his ability to do well in classes, and his mother was concerned that by him leaving for college he would no longer be able to work and help her financially.

According to Greenthal (2021), guilt in addition to lack of family support are challenges for first-generation students. Ahmad was fortunate to receive encouragement from Benita Lee, who acted as an external protective factor by motivating him to go to school and not to feel guilty about those he would leave behind. All students do not feel this pressure. Some have supportive families but lack the ability to provide financial support and as a result, do not know how to support their first-generation student's desire to enroll into college. Banks-Santilli (2017) stated, "Although perhaps supportive of higher education, their parents and family members may view their entry into college as a break in the family system rather than a continuation of their schooling."

Celia and Ahmad both shared the benefits of the Ascend College Readiness Program's financial aid packet. Each participant receives a packet that includes 101 scholarships and are encouraged to apply. In addition, participants in the program are given recommendation letters to accompany their applications. Ms. Eunice says she understands the financial burden attending college can have on families. She disclosed:

Every student who participates in the program does not attend college and if they do, attending an HBCU may not be feasible. For some students the distance is too far from home and finances are also a hindrance. Every student in the program is not poor but when considering the cost of out-of-state fees and limited financial aid packages in comparison to those of PWIs, many

of my students cannot afford HBCUs. HBCUs do not have the large endowments that many PWI and Ivy league institutions have. As a result, they cannot offer large financial aid packages.

Limited Funding and Resources

The study revealed multiple areas where funding is limited. Firstly, the Ascend Program operates without external financial support. The program does not seek state or municipal grants to subsidize its operation budget. As a result, students are responsible to pay the cost to participate in the program and attend the annual college campus tour. Because many of the students are from low-income and working class families that have limited financial resources, some creatively raise money to participate in the program. In addition, local non-profit organizations, churches and community leaders, lend support by sponsoring students who cannot afford to pay the total cost of the program's tuition.

The second example of limited funding relates to the Historically Black Colleges and Universities that have historically provided a quality education to Black students who are first-generation students from disadvantaged groups. According to Ahmad:

I have a friend who goes to a state university back home and compared to HBCUs, PWIs have more funding so it's easier to do things. Here, buildings and dorms are not up to par. Water may be cold when trying to take a shower, but this is preparing us for life. It's a struggle, but HBCU students learn to think as a result.

Black institutions with relatively low competitive admissions standards compared to predominantly White institutions have been able to produce undergraduate students that go into competitive graduate programs and with a fraction of the resources compared to predominantly White and Ivy League institutions (Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011). For example, "Xavier

University has some 3000 students and consistently produces more Black students who apply to and then graduate from medical school than any other institution in the country” (Hannah-Jones, 2015, n.p.). Indeed, these Black institutions could help more students that attend their schools but also with adequate funding, conduct research that provides empirical data that can benefit all institutions of higher education.

Similar to the students who attend and despite their rich history and legacy, Historically Black Colleges and Universities are marginalized and often left out of academic discussions around higher education that highlight the accomplishments and contributions they make by producing graduates who go on to be influential leaders who make contributions to society (Williams et al., 2018). The first woman Vice-President of the United States, Kamala Harris, is an HBCU graduate. Furthermore, the contributions of HBCUs include transforming today’s learners into tomorrow’s leaders, a commitment to serving low-income students that is unencumbered by their financial strains, and tapping the potential of students who were marginalized in prior academic environments.

Ascend College Readiness Program Limitations and Recommendations

The alumni participants interviewed participated in the Ascend College Readiness Program spanned over a range of years from the early years of the program to 2019. The experiences and recommendations reflect the findings of thematically coded responses of the participants tied to the theories that framed this study. The program evolved over the years, therefore, some of the recommendations shared by alumni participants have been added to the program’s curriculum since their participation in the program.

Alumni participants shared their feelings of a sense of belonging and acceptance when visiting and later attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities. However, it is also equally important to examine the experiences of participants that had contrasting perspectives. For example, Etta, did not have a favorable experience when visiting HBCU campuses and shared recommendations for the program. Etta said:

I knew I never was going to go to an HBCU. I didn't fit in. We only heard about the larger campuses, not the smaller ones. I felt like these are my options and I will figure out about the rest. I applied to a few – got into a couple, and decided to go to a small, private predominantly White institution in the North East.

The researcher asked Etta for details on why she did not feel she fit in at an HBCU and whether she could share insight on how the Ascend College Readiness Program could better help students that share her perspective? Etta said the following:

I grew up in affordable housing. My friends are always from outside my community. All my friends were White – no Hispanics, one or two Asians, and I had one Black friend who was also bussed to school. I didn't have any friends in the Ascend College Readiness Program, therefore, I didn't have anyone there to relate to. I would have liked more interaction with students on the college campuses we toured. I think more preparation for students and parents – can't ask what you don't know. As a first-generation student, I didn't have that experience. This may have changed since the time I went.

Etta also recommended that the Ascend College Readiness Program conduct focus groups after the trip to ask students what they learned. To her point, the researcher learned from Ms. Eunice

that these recommendations have since been added to the curriculum. According to Ms. Eunice, the students are required to keep a journal throughout the program. Notebooks are donated by a local organization and students are to also take them along the college campus tour to journal about their experience. At the conclusion of the annual trip, students are required to write an essay. According to Ms. Eunice, this assignment has multiple benefits, it helps her and the Ascend staff to learn about the students' perspectives and experiences. An additional benefit is the essay can be used for scholarship and admissions applications.

Robin-Lynne shared her recommendations for the program. She said that she enjoyed the trip, but also had suggestions for the program. Robin-Lynne suggested the following:

Students and parents should meet each other before the tour. It was very awkward. I didn't have personal friends participating but knew some people. I would have preferred more structure and preparation on an individual basis before collectively being with the group. I guess the program was not beneficial for me. The campus tours were the focus. It has to be more than a bus ride for me. Something to keep them connected afterwards.

Robin-Lynne's recommendation for continued connection afterwards could inspire a mentoring program for a first-year program for all students with a curriculum that considers first-generation students. Additionally, a summer bridge program for high school seniors could be used to provide support and resources after students graduate high school, but before they begin college in the fall.

Bridge programs are designed to address the personal and inhibiting institutional factors of undergraduate students as they transition into college and have been suggested to increase academic readiness, promote inclusion and integration into the college academic and social community. These programs also introduce students to the available supportive institutional academic support programs and services and promote self-efficacy and persistence” (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019, p. 36).

Bridge programs are to address the integration of disadvantaged students to the academic and social aspects of the college environment, set expectations, encourage persistence, and increase retention to graduation (Pazargadi, 2018). These type of programs fit Tinto’s framework for student attrition, understanding that first-generation college students are less likely to rely on high school guidance counselors for assistance when choosing an institution to attend, which makes the resource discrepancy more detrimental and directly attributes to their success (Unverferth et al., 2012). This is critical for first-generation students who lack crucial information to adequately prepare them for college.

Perspectives of the participants differ even within the same year of attending the trip. Celia and Robin-Lynne both attended the program the same year but have contrasting views on the program. Robin-Lynne says she believes the program should work to keep students connected after they attend college while Celia said she continued to stay in contact with the program director, and currently volunteers with the program.

Both participants perspectives and experiences are valid. It is also be important to note that Celia attended and graduated from an historically Black university whereas Robin-Lynne, had academic struggles during her freshmen year at an HBCU that resulted in her having

academic challenges. As a result of her poor performance, her mother made her return home instead of continuing to waste money. She said she never considered herself a strong academic study and initially worried she would have limited college options. She admitted to applying to a small HBCU versus a larger, popular school because she feared the competitive admissions process.

A shared perspective of many of the participants is the desire to interact with college students at each respective campus during the Ascend College Readiness Program's annual tour. The sense of belonging students experienced was also important to the Historically Black Colleges and University campus communities.

Ahmad said, "I didn't see dorms, cafeteria or inside a classroom because we went during the school's spring break. I still chose that school though. My uncle went there so I knew all about it, but it would have been good for other students." When asked by the researcher whether he had a different perspective when visiting other campuses during the annual tour? Ahmad responded, "We were brought to a chapel or auditorium. I think we saw the cafeteria at one school and were able to peak in a classroom, but no dorms. It's important to see where you're going to live on campus."

Finally, this researcher recommends the program maintain data on goals and outcomes in order to assess program's effectiveness. Data collection similar to a longitudinal study should be gathered to track participating students from high school to college, while matriculated in college, and during post graduate work. Without data, it is difficult to show whether the college readiness program is impactful and meeting its goals. Qualitative data collection is helpful to add

value and a narrative to the quantitative data. Stories are relatable and numbers and figures are critical in garnering support of policymakers which can lead to funding.

Implications of the Study

The State of Connecticut Common Core Anchor Standards addresses College and Career Readiness Standards as reading, writing, speaking and listening, but these standards do not address non-academic barriers for students that were found to be represented in this case study. The state legislature has both the power and the responsibility to enact laws to govern education. “All children residing within the borders of the state possess a, ‘right’ arising from a constitutionally imposed ‘duty’ of the State, that the state makes ample provisions for their education” (Alexander & Alexander, 2011, p. 122).

The participants were all first-generation college students from a disadvantaged, marginalized group. However, because each state is given the power to develop their own standards as long as they contain the tenants set forth by the Department of Education. For example, Oregon’s Department of Education has adopted a definition of college and career readiness that has positive values and nonacademic standards that include understanding of postsecondary education options, expectations, costs, and processes, in addition to the ability to understand and evaluate career options and pathways (Oregon Education Investment Board, 2014).

Oregon’s interpretation of their responsibility to prepare students for college and career readiness is an example of ‘Best Practices’. This is a holistic approach that has tangible long-term benefits to the individual and society. According to Carroll and Erkut (2009), the more education one has, the higher their salary and as a result, the higher their tax payments. These tax

payments support social services, Social Security and Medicare. Also, it is important to note that there is a linkage between education and civic involvement. "...education plays such a crucial role in the cultivation of civic and political engagement and in shrinking the gap in rates of political participation between Whites and African Americans" (Hartney & Flavin, 2014 p. 5). Whether these students go on to pursue a formal postsecondary education, training in a skill trade or embark into the workforce, they will be better equipped as a result of Oregon's interpretation and execution of the Common Core Standards.

Connecticut has adopted a definition of college and career readiness and included it in the State's Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility request. The state-endorsed definition of college and career readiness states that readiness "involves three major skill areas: core academic skills and the ability to apply those skills to concrete situations to function in the workplace and in routine daily activities; employability skills (such as critical thinking and responsibility) that are essential in any career area; and technical, job-specific skills related to a specific career pathway..." (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an academic framework and although it is not a new concept to scholars, it is considered a new radical perspective (Chapman et al., 2013) that currently has policymakers becoming versed in the framework and learning the roles they play in crafting policies and legislation that impact the systemic structures and racial divide that exists in the United States. The discussions around the inclusion of this framework in these spaces has been controversial, divisive and even visceral. The division among lawmakers and scholars

concerning CRT in school curriculums, workplace training and influence on legislation, confirms the racism and bias that is embedded in laws and institutions in the United States.

Critical Race Theory is intrinsically embedded throughout the United States political structures including education and education policy. Many of the barriers the participants in this study spoke of are a result of the racial constructs in which the political and judicial system is built. This “anti-oppressive theory” (Chapman et al., 2013), challenges the tradition of “White Supremacy” (Chapman et al., 2013).

In CRT, “White Supremacy” refers to “the operation of forces that saturate the everyday mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of White people” (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1021). There is a linkage between political inequality and educational opportunity in the United States. Studies have shown that policymakers are not equally responsive to educational needs of Black students compared to White students (Hartney & Flaven, 2014).

Connecticut has one of the largest achievement gaps in the country and of the 10 metropolitan areas in the country with the largest achievement gaps, six are in the northeast and 3 are in Connecticut (Rothwell, 2012). Black and Latino students are the most impacted by this gap; receiving the lowest test scores when compared to their White counterparts. Furthermore, the achievement gap is directly linked to quality of education and access to effective teachers (Coleman, 1966; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004). Data shows that the economic gap has a direct impact on quality of education received. Higher-performing schools are located in more affluent areas - said in another way, zip codes determine students’ quality of education.

Data from this study can be used to inform policymakers of the challenges with Connecticut’s Common Core Anchor Standards. These standards do not address the non-

academic factors that act as barriers for first-generation students and students from disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Connecticut's Common Core Anchor Standards should have an intended goal of providing continuity to a postsecondary curriculum. A review in literature revealed a pilot program sponsored by the Connecticut Department of Education:

Sec. 10-15h. Pilot program to incorporate common core state standards. (a) On or before July 1, 2013, the Department of Education, in collaboration with the Board of Regents for Higher Education and the Board of Trustees of The University of Connecticut, shall develop a pilot program to incorporate Connecticut's common core state standards into the curricula of the priority school districts, as described in section 10-266p, and, for the school year commencing July 1, 2013, to the school year ending June 30, 2018, inclusive, align such curricula with college level programs offered by the constituent units of the state system of higher education and the independent institutions of higher education in this state. (b) The pilot program shall require the local or regional board of education for a priority school district to partner with the Board of Regents for Higher Education on behalf of a regional community-technical college or a state university, the Board of Trustees for The University of Connecticut on behalf of the university or the governing board of an independent institution of higher education on behalf of such institution to (1) evaluate and align curricula, (2) evaluate students in grade ten or eleven using a college readiness assessment developed or adopted by the Department of Education, (3) use the results of such evaluations to assess college readiness, and (4) offer a plan of support to any student in grade twelve who is found to be not ready for college based on such student's results on the college readiness assessment. Such local or regional board of

education shall annually report such test results and assessments to the Department of Education, the Board of Regents for Higher Education, the Office of Financial and Academic Affairs for Higher Education and The University of Connecticut (State of Connecticut, 2012, n.p.).

The pilot program focused on academic preparedness and did not consider non-academic factors in priority school districts. Criteria for priority school classification includes being in the highest percentile of students on welfare and largest number of students scoring below the remedial level on the Connecticut Mastery Test. Three of the areas with the largest achievement gaps in the country are located in Connecticut and are priority school districts. This pilot program focusing only on academic preparedness and not including non-academic factors that are challenges and barriers for students' postsecondary advancement is an example of a missed opportunity. Based on the research from this study, this researcher recommends that education policymakers reimagine their interpretation of Common Core Anchor Standards, think strategically by working with secondary schools and partner with higher education institutions to holistically and strategically prepare students for postsecondary education.

Furthermore, by considering including these college and career readiness programs in the Common Core [Anchor] Standards, defined as out-of-school time programs to better prepare students for their first-year college experience. Out-of-school time programs are defined as supervised programs that young people regularly attend when school is not in session. This can include before- and after- school programs on a school campus or facilities (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The inclusion of out-of-school time programs like the Ascend

College Readiness Program and other college readiness programs would allow for them to receive adequate funding and resources that current school district-sponsored after school programs receive. As a result of including college readiness programs into Common Core State Standards, we could bridge the gap and equip first-generation students with the tools they need to transition into college successfully.

First-generation college students are at a disadvantage because they have little knowledge of the college experience and have little to no information about applying to colleges and obtaining financial aid in comparison to students whose parents have bachelor's degrees (Houle, 2014). Also, first-generation students often come from families experiencing greater levels of economic hardships than their counterparts who are second and third-generation college students (Willingham, 2012). Moreover, when compared to other student groups, first-generation college students are more likely to drop out of college and unlikely to complete their degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015),

Finally, Connecticut passed legislation, H.B. 7212, an act concerning the promotion of loan forgiveness programs (Aragon, 2018) in efforts to recruit minorities to teach in schools. This researcher believes a comprehensive minority teacher recruitment program, specifically for Black [male] teachers in Connecticut public schools, with annual goals for recruitment and benchmarks, is essential for the effectiveness of the program. As evidenced in the study, students benefit from teachers who have a shared experience and understanding of their life, family and community.

Recommendations for Future Research

First, there is a need for continued studies to be conducted on successfully integrating first-generation students of marginalized groups into college. There have been many studies that show students' home environment has a greater impact on their learning than time in school. Although, the quality of schooling is enormously important to both test scores and future economic success, most of a child's education takes place outside the classroom, at home (Rothwell, 2012). The quality of learning tends to be greater for children of more educated parents, who are exposed to thousands more unique words per hour of interaction than children of less educated parents (Hart & Risley, 2003). More educated parents are also more likely to discuss school related matters with their children and attend meetings—all of which is associated with higher student achievement (Houtenville & Smith Conway, 2008).

Additional studies that focus on providing support and assistance for first-generation students' needs when transitioning into college would have long-term effects on their college and career success. The parents and families of these students are not equipped to help them because they often lack the knowledge and experience of college and campus culture.

Finally, future research needs to be done on the transition of Black, first-generation students and how predominantly White institutions can provide the sense of belonging found at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Understanding PWIs cannot fully replicate the embedded in the history and legacy that is unique to HBCUs, they can commit to being culturally engaging campus environments and use Tinto's theoretical umbrella framework for theories of student retention, integration, and transition (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993).

Recommendations for Policymakers

For federal level policymakers, more funding should be directed to Historically Black Colleges and Universities to support these institutions and their mission. A study by Harper et al., 2004 examined student engagement and satisfaction at Historically Black Colleges and universities but there has not been additional research conducted since. In addition, there have been limited research concerning the experiences of Black students at HBCU's and even less over the past decade, especially in research focused on Black males and Black women are outpacing Black males attending college (Provasnik et al., 2004).

The researcher intends to share information learned from this study with education policymakers at the state and local level, in addition to legislative policymakers. The researcher recommends policymakers establish college readiness programs that address non-academic as well as academic barriers for first-generation students of marginalized groups and summer bridge programs for students to transition from high school to college.

Connecticut's Office of Higher Education provides funding for colleges and universities college readiness and summer bridge programs through the Minority Advancement Program (MAP). The mission of MAP is to increase retention and graduation rates of pre-college minority students and to provide a bridge of academic, social, and financial support services to first-time, full-time freshman that help them navigate the college experience and graduate on time (Office of Higher Education, 2019). In addition, under the Minority Advancement Program, the Office of Higher Education sponsors the Connecticut Collegiate Awareness and Preparation Program (ConnCAP). ConnCAP's mission is to help students complete a secondary education and to matriculate and succeed in a postsecondary education (Office of Higher Education, 2013). The

ConnCAP program requirements include 1) Student is a resident of Connecticut 2) Student attends a priority secondary school 3) Student must be between sixth and ninth grades 4) Student is an academic underachiever or unlikely to achieve their full academic potential 5) Student is from a low-income family (Office of Higher Education, 2013).

This researcher believes the criteria to participate in ConnCAP is limited and does not address the issues the results of this case study indicates are germane to college readiness for Black, first-generation college students. This study revealed a need for college readiness programs for Black, first-generation students that address non-academic factors in addition to academic factors.

The researcher learned from Ascend College Readiness Program counselor, Kai, that although Ms. Eunice and the program does not rely on outside funding for operation, in the past the City has provided grants. According to Kai, the program could have a larger impact and benefit more students if they were able to receive assistance annually from the City or school district. Kai has volunteered with the program for over seven years and believes they could expand the curriculum and invite more students if they had more resources.

“It is important for higher education researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to better understand how to maximize the success of higher education’s increasingly diverse undergraduate populations” (Museus et al., 2017, p. 188). This researcher recommends the Ascend College Readiness Program and those that provide similar college preparedness for first-generation students to be included in the school district curriculum and standards, and that they be awarded the necessary funding to operate. The researcher also recommends that these programs are funded through their respective State Departments of Education.

In answer to the achievement gap in Connecticut, policymakers established the Achievement Gap Task Force in 2011 which later became the Interagency Agency Council on Achievement Gap. The Achievement Gap Task Force created a Master Plan for Ending the Achievement Gap, issued in spring 2014. The Master Plan identified strategy recommendations to be considered both “Inside the School House” and Outside the School House.” The Interagency Council was established to address root causes of inequities, identified in the Master Plan, that lead to gaps. The council is co-chaired by the Commissioner of Education and Lieutenant Governor, and consists of key agencies including the Dept of Early Childhood, Department of Housing, Dept of Public Health, department of Children and Families, department of Social Services, Connecticut State colleges and Universities, Department of Economic and Community Development, department of Administrative Services, and Office of Policy and Management.

When created, the goal of the Interagency Council on Achievement Gap was to eliminate the achievement gap by 2020. In 2019, Miguel Cardona, [former] Commissioner of Education, now Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, using data to demonstrate the achievement gap between White students, students of color and high-needs populations, indicated that although the achievement gap is closing, it will take until 2060 to close at the current rate (State of Connecticut Board of Education, 2020).

Unfortunately, students from racial minority groups are most affected by this achievement gap and would benefit most from programs and initiatives set forth by the Interagency Council on Achievement Gap. Furthermore, multiple academic and non-academic factors contribute to these students’ overall success. Non-academic barriers include the digital

divide where many students experience limited access to devices and high-speed Wi-Fi, impoverished neighborhoods, chronic absenteeism, lack of family support and living in food deserts with limited access to healthy foods.

This researcher aims to pursue state and local level policymakers, explaining the importance of supporting programs and legislation that promotes equal education opportunities and work to dismantle systemic inequalities.

Whether analyzed at the policymaking level or the level of individual citizens' political attitudes, White students receive far more attention and subsequent response compared to African American students. Instead of promoting equality of opportunity, America's system of K-12 education—with its heavy reliance on state and local control—may instead serve to further exacerbate existing political inequalities between Whites and African Americans (Hartney & Flaven, 2014, p. 21).

Overall, policymakers have taken a number of steps over the past few decades to expand access to high-quality education for disadvantaged groups but more work needs to be done and at a faster pace, with a broader view that focuses on both short and long-term goals. These goals should include funding, teacher workforce policies that include minority teacher recruitment, inequities in discipline and special education referrals, college preparatory programs, out of school programs and parent involvement.

Conclusions

Important conclusions can be drawn from this retrospective case study of the Ascend College Readiness Program. The first year of college can be more challenging for first-generation college students than their peers who have college-educated parents. First-generation,

Black students have a different experience than White students when on a college campus even when engaging with the same faculty and the same campus activities (Museus et al., 2017).

During this first year while students are undergoing this transitional process, first-generation students feel a sense of belonging with students of similar socio-economic status (Means et al., 2017, p. 916).

For many of the participants in this case study, a sense of belonging provided by Historically Black Colleges and Universities contributed to their feelings about their experience in the Ascend College Readiness Program. One could argue they should be mutually exclusive. Participants who had a positive experience during the college campus tour, attribute this to the Ascend College Readiness Program as a result of the program being the conduit that gave them the HBCU exposure. Furthermore, one could make the point that HBCUs are inherently ‘culturally engaging campus environments’ by virtue of their mission. However, some of the alumni participants did not attend or complete their degrees at HBCUs, but exemplified resilience and motivation in their pursuit of their college education and careers.

Wagnild and Collins (2009) assert that despite there being many studies that have provided empirical data defining the characteristic of resilience, there is limited research on the assessment of resilience. For the sake of this study, resilience was measured by the ability for the participants to persevere in attaining their college education while shouldering the challenges that come with being first-generation college students. Participants shared overcoming guilt of leaving family and friends behind, having no knowledge of how to navigate through the admissions and registration process, and experiencing financial barriers while balancing academic pressures of competing with other first-generation as well as second and third-

generation students that had the advantage of parents who could prepare them for college. Despite these barriers, deficiencies in economic equity and challenges, resilient students are determined to be successful and overcome their circumstances. Of the nine participants in this study, seven earned a bachelor's degree and two were freshmen when interviewed and still enrolled in school.

The participants in the study showed motivation and expectancy value theory because even when faced with challenges, they continued to work towards their goals even those that experienced personal and academic setbacks, realized the value of earning a degree. Robin-Lynne suffered from academic and financial challenges but realized in order to provide a better life for herself and her daughter, she would need to complete her education. Robin-Lynne is a registered nurse and continued on to complete postgraduate work in order to teach.

Celia was pursuing a doctoral degree in Education with a focus on special education when she participated in the study. She spoke of the importance of providing generational wealth for her children. She shared that she owns residential property in Connecticut and Maryland. Celia admits that she had advantages when attending the Ascend College Readiness Program. Her father's employer paid for her program tuition but understands many of her peers had difficulty paying the cost to participate in the program.

Avery was resilient as a first-generation student overcoming the challenges of living in an impoverished neighborhood where he and friends did not think college was attainable. He said:

After the first year, I realized I could get good grades and go to college. I could have gone to a PWI, but I chose to go to an HBCU and get that divine history. I became the first child of my mother and first in my family to graduate college. I majored in

Accounting then went into supply chain management. I interviewed with Reebok in Boston but chose to stay in the south. Work with major corporations like WWE, AT&T and Waste Management.

Sense of Belonging

Campus communities that provide an environment of belonging and focuses on a culturally conscious framework, cultivates a connection for students to their campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As this study has revealed through interviews with participants and literature review, minority students have significantly different experiences than White students when on a college campus and understanding of the social environmental and psychological elements needed in order to provide a culturally engaging campus environment (Museus et al., 2017). Historically Black Colleges and Universities provide the support to help students culturally and academically transition and integrate into college. Participants also shared the cultural validation and the cultural integrity (Jun & Tierney, 1999) the curriculum and HBCU campus provides and contributes to their success in college. Avery explains his cultural validation as an HBCU graduate:

It's different...it's just different. I think it was just something that I needed. Your peers are going to always be the highlight because you know you have friends there - you know? With me, my evolution is probably a little different than everyone else's, but I noticed - something that I didn't expect - the number of people that I connected with, because even though we know about Yale's [University] Legacy, as an HBCU graduate, I have a legacy too. You know how many years I have been out of school? It's something I didn't anticipate - the relationships that alumni have. It speaks to the culture of the campus...you

know it's a vital time especially with trying to move into manhood...leaving school and now you're trying to figure it all out, but knowing you have a network now. I can honestly say, my network is strong professionally - I mean this is just a blessing man when you know no matter where you go, you're never outside of your network.

It is also important to note that faculty members were one of the most important variables that contributed to students sense of belonging (Means et al., 2017). Students arrive on campus with the expectation that they will be invited and accepted into the campus culture (Means & Pyne, 2017). When their needs are not met, they typically do not do well. Most students withdraw and do not graduate.

Tiana talks about her experience at an HBCU in comparison to the experience of her friends who attended predominantly White institutions, “When you talk about things they [HBCU teachers] understand. They look at you as a person not just someone they have to teach. My friends at PWIs are not experiencing this.”

Data from this study reveals that predominantly White institutions are still on the pursuit of identifying how to best support Black students (Strayhorn, 2012) but are not able to provide the ‘Sense of Belonging’ for Black students that HBCUs are able to provide. Students attending HBCUs do not have experience the psychoemotional burden of having to successfully navigate a racially politicized space where they have little to no support from peers or faculty from their same racial or ethnic group (harper et al., 2011).

Researcher's Experience and Knowledge

This researcher has dedicated her career to doing transformative, purposeful work that impacts the lives of individuals. Most of my career has been devoted to Education. As an administrator and instructor working in higher education, my goal has always been and continues to be to do transformative work that can help change the trajectory of students' lives. The institution where I formerly worked, was located in a city where there was a prison, newly constructed juvenile detention center, underperforming school district, and one community college and one four-year university. My goal was to impress upon my students that education is the great equalizer (Grove & Montgomery, 2003) and earning a degree could change their quality of life and the next generation's lives after them. I imparted that their current station, parent's financial and education limitations, should not determine their goals and aspirations. They should dream as far as their minds could wander and not let the current view from their window, determine their worldview.

It was not until after conducting interviews with participants that through self-reflection, I realized that I had a similar experience during my formative years. I experienced culture shock when moving from school to school and from town to town. Each move brought about feelings of uncertainty and a fear of not being accepted. Whether transferring to a diverse, inner-city school or a predominantly white school, I rarely experienced a sense of belonging. I always found myself working to be accepted. Non-academic factors impacted the adversity I experienced.

As a result of a vacancy in a local magnet school, I was transferred to a new school during the fifth grade. Both schools were in the same school district but by virtue of magnet

schools' city-wide lottery, I was now in school with students from other sides of town and not the kids I knew from my neighborhood. The transition took time and shortly after feeling comfortable, as a result of my parents' divorce, we moved to a suburban town with a less diverse population.

The new school administered a math and reading placement test to determine my math and reading levels. Both the teachers and students appeared to be surprised that because I came from an inner-city school district that I tested above grade level. As a result, I had to read lessons independently, without the support of peers. I was my own reading group. This caused my relationships with other students to be strained and difficult to cultivate -- especially with other Black students. I was accused of thinking I was better than them. I found myself being more accepted by the White students. Although the town lacked ethnic diversity, many of the Black students that attended this neighborhood school lived in an affordable housing complex.

Because the local neighborhood school was not academically challenging, my mother enrolled me into a parochial school where I was one of three Black students and we were all girls. The private school's curriculum was more rigorous than the public school and provided a richer academic experience. I recall the non-academic factors and social engagement to be the biggest challenges that proved to have a lasting impact. Despite my academic achievement, teachers made assumptions about my athletic abilities and religious practices. The gym teacher assumed I was good in basketball and track. I was never asked of my interest or abilities. I did not excel in these sports, but instead did well in soccer. Playing soccer helped me lose weight and improve my asthma.

Moreover, while attending this private school, it was the first time I experienced discrimination and felt a lack of empathy from teachers. Students made assumptions about my taste in music, family economic status and appearance. The girls made comments about my hair and challenged my unwillingness to wear make-up. I was called the ‘N-word’ by fellow students and often put in a situation where I had to defend and advocate for myself.

The following academic year my family moved back to the urban city and I transferred back to the magnet school I previously attended for a short time in fifth grade. Interestingly, the students welcomed me back and I felt a sense of belonging, even though, I was challenged about my new eclectic tastes in music and lack of use of colloquialisms commonly used in the inner-city urban communities.

It was these grade school experiences and adversity that built my resilience and fostered my ability to code-switch my vernacular and adapt from one cultural and social space to another. Code-switching is considered a strategy adopted by Black people in order to successfully navigate from interaction with interracial groups and spaces outside of The Black Community and switching back (McCluney et al., 2019). This could involve switching one’s appearance, speech, mannerisms, and behaviors. “Research suggests code-switching often occurs in spaces where negative stereotypes of Black people run counter to what are considered appropriate behaviors norms for a specific environment” (McCluney et al., 2019, np). For me code-switching was a way to be accepted and not accused of ‘acting white’ or called ‘ghetto’.

Attending a magnet high school with a college preparatory curriculum coupled with my family’s influence, enrolling in college was always my goal. The influence of my peers and curriculum influenced the quest to attend a four-year institution. However, Historically Black

Colleges and Universities (HBCU) were never introduced or discussed by guidance counselors or administrators. I had heard of these institutions and knew my mother had friends who attended an HBCU in North Carolina and a friend who was an alumni of an HBCU in Tennessee. He was an accomplished attorney and offered to sponsor my admission to his alma mater, but because I had little knowledge of these school and the advantages of me attending, I was not interested and respectfully declined his help.

As a first-generation college student, from the Connecticut's gold coast, like Ahmad and Adaire, I too was inspired by "A Different World" and "School Daze", and attended an HBCU. I had similar experiences as the participants in the study when I first visited the school I attended in Atlanta. I immediately felt a sense of belonging and cultural identity on the campus. In contrast, transferring from a private, predominantly White institution, I also witnessed the effects of operating an institution with less financial resources. The institution could not provide a large financial aid package to subsidize my tuition and the registration process was not as seamless as the PWI due to limited staff and available computers. However, the immediate feeling of belonging was impactful. I was met with an instant connection with faculty, staff, and students. This euphoric feeling resonated with me beyond any limitations or deficiencies that the institution may have been under as a result of funding disparities.

Orientation was more of a ceremonial right of passage versus a perfunctory exercise. It was impressed upon us that learning the history of the school and its legacy was just as important as registering for classes and the academic coursework. Also, despite relevance of history and tradition, there was not a feeling of hierarchy or ranking amongst faculty and staff. Everyone contributed to the admissions and registration process. I recall needing documents faxed from my

previous institution and the only working fax at the time was in the university president's office. Without hesitation, I was provided access.

Similar to Ahmad, I was intrigued by meeting Black students from other regions of the country in which I had little to no knowledge that they had large populations of people of color and the only knowledge they had of Connecticut was of the affluent gold coast. I developed friendships with students from Kansas, Denver, Michigan, Illinois, California, Florida, Ohio, Georgia and New York. I also developed relationships with teachers and staff. The faculty were relatable and for the first time, I experienced Black culture, history and our contributions to academia. Prior to this experience, I had not had a textbook that included lessons that included the Black experience and perspective. This made the work and class discussions valuable and relatable. Finally, the culture and people of the African diaspora were included. Reflecting back, I now realize this experience was empowering and life-altering.

Like Linda, I was causing a financial burden on my family by attending a private HBCU that offered minimal financial aid. Even though I was doing well in classes, I agreed to transfer to a state school in Connecticut to eliminate some of the financial burden on my parents. However, I was not prepared for the culture-shock I experienced when transferring to a predominantly White institution. I was able to transition socially by joining the Black Student Union and participating in cultural and social activities, but the academic transition was difficult. As a History major, the required courses were devoid of the Black perspective. The African History course was being taught by a White professor and the Black History course was classified as an elective, not a required course in the History Department's curriculum.

Although I went on to do postgraduate studies and work in Student Affairs at the predominantly White institution – now my alma mater, the time spent enrolled at the HBCU was invaluable and helped frame my worldview. Gallup-Purdue University conducted a study collecting data from 50,000 college alumni over two years and reported HBCU graduates were more likely to have felt supported while in college and are thriving in their careers more than their Black peers who graduated from PWIs. Data from the study revealed, HBCU graduates are twice as likely to say their education was worth the cost (New, 2015).

Today, I embrace my eclecticism, appreciate my diverse life experiences and educate others on the nuances of Black culture. We are not a monolithic people and are deserving of a more inclusive and comprehensive cultural understanding. I do not code-switch as often but consider it a talent and not an impediment. "A sense of belonging and acceptance is a basic human desire and need, and at times a sense of belonging may supersede the physiological and security needs as stated in Maslow's hierarchy" (Wright, 1026, p. 14). Based on the experiences shared by participants and my own personal experience, I believe there is something unique that occurs on Historically Black College and University (HBCU) campuses. Black students enrolled at HBCUs experience a life-changing experience similar to alchemy – they are transformed. Even if not equipped with the skills and advantages of their white peers, Black, first-generation students are able to persevere. This resilience is worth more than gold.

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Appendix A: Participant Interview Protocol

1. How did you find out about the program?
2. What year did you attend the Ascend Program?
3. Did you go on the college campus tour more than once?
4. Did your parents have any influence over you participating in the Ascend Program and attending the tour or did you decide on your own?
5. Did attending the tour have an influence on you determining whether you wanted to attend a Historically Black College or University?
6. Are you a first-generation college student?
7. What was your experience with Ascend Program and college campus tour?
8. Did the Ascend Program have an influence on your attending college an HBCU?
9. Did Ascend staff help you with applications and the admissions process or FA
10. Do you have any ideas on how to make the program, more improvements or effective?
11. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience with the program?

Additional Questions Added to Interview Protocol

1. Did you stay in contact with any from the program while in school?
2. Do you think there are a lot of students who do not attend the Ascend Program because they cannot afford the college campus tour trip?
3. What are your thoughts on students who attended the Ascend Program but went to a PWI?
4. Do you think living in CT had anything to do with your decision to attend an HBCU or PWI?

5. Did participating in the Ascend Program or staff have any influence on you academically while in college?

Figure 2

Methodological Map

Retrospective Case Study: Ascend College Readiness Program

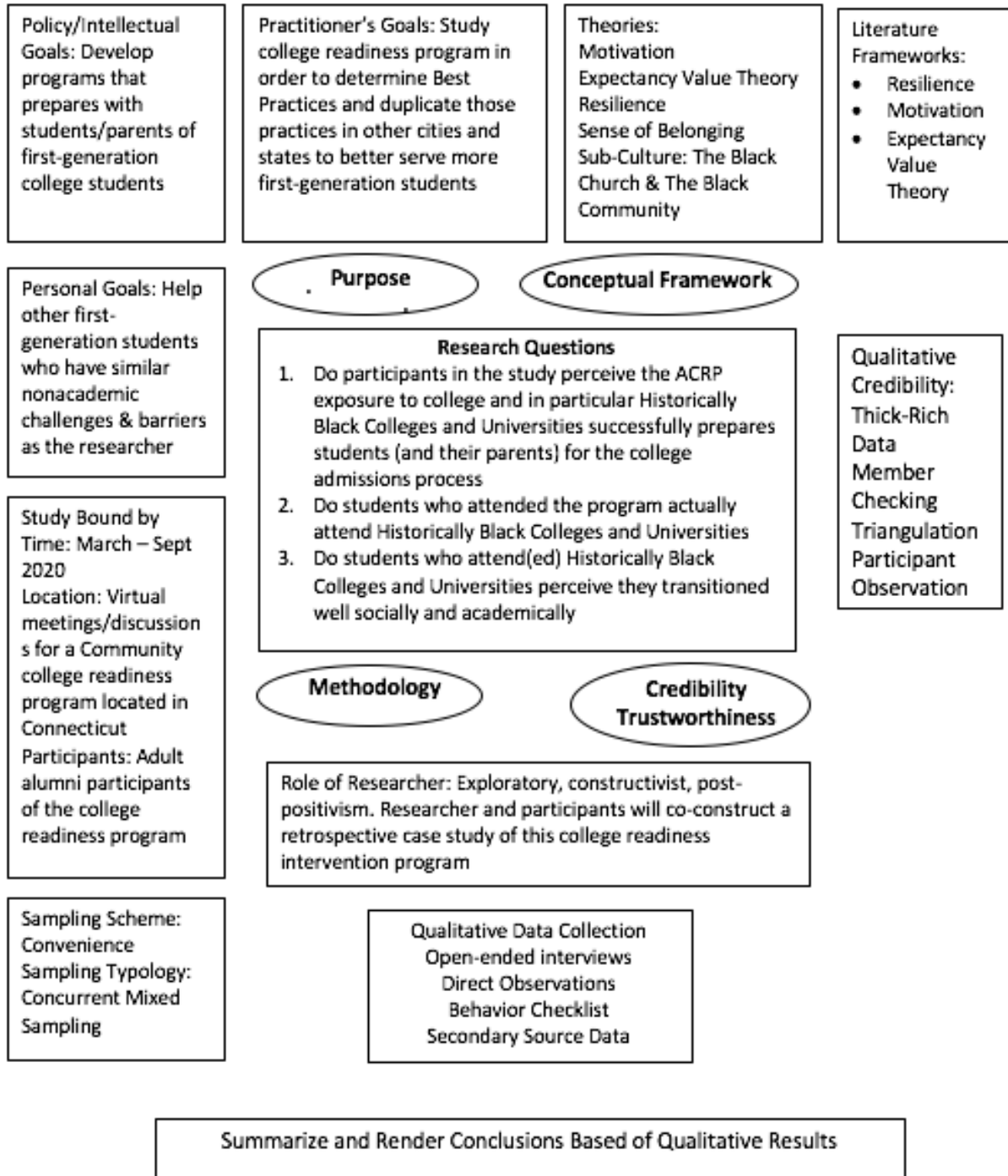


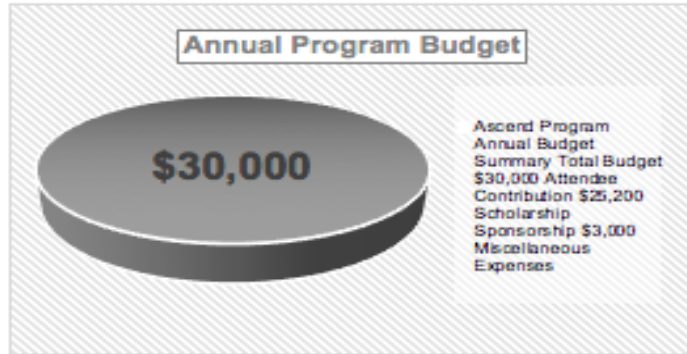
Figure 3

Ascend Program Annual Budget

Ascend Program Annual Budget

Summary

Total Budget
\$30,000
 Attendee Contribution
\$25,200
 Scholarship Sponsorship
\$3,000
 Miscellaneous Expenses
\$1,800



Fundraiser Income

Description	Amount
Annual Banquet Net	\$2,500.00
Community Scholarship Contributions	\$1,400.00
Other	\$250.00
Total	\$4,150.00

Tour Expenses

Description	Amount
Chartered Bus	\$10,000.00
Room & Board	\$5,200.00
Food	\$4,800.00
Journals	\$320.00
Backpacks	\$1,200.00
T-Shirts	\$576.00
Miscellaneous	\$1,800.00
Total	\$23,896.00

Additional Expenses

Description	Amount
Orientation	\$200.00
Admissions Application Workshop	\$375.00
Financial Aid Workshop	\$100.00
Total	\$675.00