CREATING MY VILLAGE: A NARRATIVE STUDY EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH ON THE COLLEGE READINESS OF FIRST-GENERATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Dedication

For my grandparents:

Rachel and Henry Battle (Grandma and Papa)

and

Geraldine and Louis Rozie (Nimmie and Grandpa)

Grandma and Papa: You were the impetus for this work. I wish you were here to see it come to fruition. I love and miss you both.

Nimmie: You have always been an inspiration, as well as one of my biggest cheerleaders, and I am excited to celebrate and share this accomplishment with you. I love you!

Grandpa: Thank you for being an inspiration from above.
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Abstract

Research indicates that when reviewing high school academic performance and standardized test results—two of the traditional measures of college readiness—first-generation and African American college students are among some of the least college ready demographics in the United States. The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the similarities in challenges faced by students who are either African American or first-generation, and examine how students who identified as both first-generation and African American increased their level of college readiness through reliance on their community cultural wealth and various forms of capital. Through the use of interviews, three themes emerged. From those themes, key findings indicated that students who identified as both first-generation and African American relied on multiple streams of support and various forms of capital throughout their transition from high school to college, utilized their aspirational and resistant capital as means of motivation, and persevered through obstacles through a reliance on their support networks. The study concluded with suggestions for further research and implications for practice.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this narrative study is to discover the role of community cultural wealth (CCW) in the college readiness of traditional-aged African American, first-generation college students at a four-year institution. For the purposes of this research, college readiness will be defined as:

the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences prepare a student to be successful when enrolled in an introductory or general education course without remediation at a 2-year, 4-year, vocational or trade school, with successful being defined as completing entry-level courses at a level of understanding and proficiency that makes it possible for the student to consider taking the next course in the sequence of the next level course in the subject area (Conley, 2008b).

The knowledge generated from this study is expected to inform the support services offered to students who identify as both African American and first-generation students as they transition from high school to college.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to college readiness as a way to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study are discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

**Context and Background**

College readiness is an issue of national concern as evidenced by the recent implementation of the Common Core Standards, which 42 out of 50 states have adopted as a way to ensure a standard, consistent level of knowledge across the states in English and mathematics courses. This standard knowledge, in theory, would positively impact students’ college and career readiness (About the Standards, 2017). Over the years, college readiness has been defined
in a variety of ways, and is deemed a crucial factor for a student to make a smooth transition from high school to college. College readiness is measured primarily by academic performance in high school and on standardized tests. However, research has recently recognized that non-academic factors, such as knowledge about the college process, parents’ level of academic preparation, and how well students handle the transition from high school to college, also impact a student’s level of college readiness (Conley, 2007; Tierney, 2014).

One third of college students in the United States are considered first-generation students—the first in their families to attend college (Balemian & Feng, 2013). The overwhelming majority of first-generation students are students from minority backgrounds: 24% are Asian, 41% are African-American, and 51% are Latino (SAT College Readiness Report, 2013). First-generation students tend to have less core academic preparation than non-first-generation students (Choy, 2001). Thus, they are not as ready for college as their peers who are not first-generation students. First-generation students also often face difficulty when transitioning from high school to college due to a lack of knowledge regarding the process itself (Choy, 2001; Collier & Morgan, 2008). There are also disparities in standardized test performance between first-generation population and non-first-generation students (Balemian & Feng, 2013).

Overall, African American students face similar challenges, and are the least college ready ethnicity, having the lowest average SAT and ACT exam results across all ethnicities and graduating at a slower rate than all other ethnicities. In 2007-2008, 49% of African American undergraduate students also identified as first-generation (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), 41% of African American children lived in a home where their parents had a high school diploma or less level of education.
Effect of deficit model thinking on African Americans

In order to understand the difficulties African American students face today, it is important to understand how African Americans have been framed historically as “deficient” with regard to their intelligence. This deficit model directly counters the theory of community cultural wealth. During slavery, Blacks were not allowed to receive an education. Southern states created laws that made it a crime to teach slaves how to read, and, as a result, early education of Blacks was primarily through oral tradition (Spring, 1996). Slaves learned how to read and write in secret, and were punished when caught (Spring, 1996). Once slavery ended, African Americans grappled with being considered less intelligent than their White counterparts. During slavery, it was widely assumed that Blacks had smaller brains and were intellectually inferior to Whites (Spring, 1996). This assumption—supported by President Thomas Jefferson and Arthur de Gobineau, a poet and novelist who became a fervent supporter of the master Aryan race—eventually was promoted by scientists who claimed to have scientific proof (Porteus, 1937; Shuey, 1958; Jensen, 1969).

The disparities in quality of life between Blacks and Whites with regard to education, types of employment and wealth continue today. These differences are often attributed to the lingering effects of slavery (Cable & Mix, 2003). Some researchers acknowledge that the academic struggles faced by many Black students can be a direct result of institutional racism. Educational inequity is fueled when a dominant group oppresses another within schools that are structured in a manner that gives the dominant group the advantage (Spears, 1978; King, Houston & Middleton, 2001). This deficit thinking model ties directly to the educational concept of banking, which refers to a metaphor where teachers fill the empty containers (students) with knowledge (hooks, 2014). In that scenario, teachers are viewed as all knowing, and students are
seen as empty, and thus have no ability to think critically or own knowledge. García and Guerra (2004) examined deficit thinking within the United States—and how schools embody the concept. They argue that, in order to create change, educators need to challenge their own individual prejudices and critically examine “systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities for students from nondominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds” (p. 155).

The theoretical framework of community cultural wealth is a direct counterargument to the deficit thinking that is present in the banking model of education. Deficit thinking is harmful because it “takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

The way that this country’s system of education has tried to compensate for students of color lack of cultural capital is through the banking education method, which was initially critiqued by Freire (1973) and further critiqued by hooks (2014), where educators teach students the cultural knowledge that is deemed valuable by society (Yosso, 2005).

While there is a wealth of research pertaining to African American and first-generation college student’s academic success and struggles separately, there is little research that specifically explores the experiences of students who are both first-generation and African American. The framework of community cultural wealth can be viewed as one way communities of color have reacted to the effects of institutional racism—relying on their culture for strength and direction. Given that both communities rely on support from peers or adults as they transition from high school to college, and thus often create their own communities, this framework will connect directly to the research question. Therefore, this study seeks to examine
the college readiness of first-generation, African American college students through the lens of community cultural wealth.

**Rationale and Significance**

There are several major reasons why college readiness is important. A high level of college readiness increases a student’s chances of becoming a college graduate—a college degree holder has a higher rate of employment and lifetime earnings, higher levels of engagement in civic activities, higher rates of living a healthy lifestyle, including lower rates of smoking and obesity, and increased likelihood of engagement in educational activities with one’s children (Balemian & Feng, 2013). Students who are underprepared for college are less likely to complete a college degree, which impacts their earning potential and the country’s growing economic need for a more highly skilled workforce.

The impact of high school students not being college ready has implications for both the individual and society as whole (Perin, 2006; Saxon & Boylan, 2001). One consequence for society is the cost associated with remedial courses. Colleges often will offer these types of courses as a way to fill in the gaps in knowledge before placing them in college-level courses. Ninety-eight percent of all public, community colleges in the United States offer one or more developmental education courses in reading, writing, mathematics, and 80% of public, four-year institutions do the same. In addition, 59% of private four-year colleges offer at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course (Parsad & Lewis, 2003).

Dropping out of college also impacts both the individual and the economics of society. Graduating from college continues to be a major factor that determines whether or not an individual will have at least a middle class income (Carnevale, 2007). In 2009, an adult with only a high school diploma earned an average of $33,213. Those with an Associate’s degree earned an average of $39,867, and those with a Bachelor’s degree earned over $56,472 (U.S. Census
Bureau, 2009). Carnevale (2007), an economist, stresses the importance of an educated workforce: “We need to dramatically increase postsecondary attainment, especially among underserved groups. Without them, we simply cannot produce enough skilled workers for the jobs of the future” (p. 34). Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, and Venezia (2006) echo this concern in their report on college readiness: “At a time when the knowledge-based, global economy requires more Americans with education and training beyond high school, the nation confronts the prospect of a sustained drop in the average educational levels of the U.S. workforce” (p. 1). Carnevale and Desrochers (2003) estimate that by 2020, the United States could face a shortfall of 14 million workers for jobs that require a minimum of a postsecondary education (Kallison & Stader, 2012).

The lack of college readiness of students who are both African American and first-generation is a significant problem of practice because it illustrates that a substantial number of students are not receiving an education that prepares them for college. Since a college education prepares young adults for careers, it could impact American society negatively if this trend continues. By 2018, people of color will make up more than half of the children under the age of 18. By 2043, Whites will no longer make up the majority in the United States (Asians, 2013). Not addressing college readiness of first-generation, African American students now will lead to a less educated, diverse and skilled workforce. Investigating the factors that impact the college readiness of African American, first-generation students will primarily raise awareness so that educators know what their students are facing and will be better prepared to support these students throughout their college years so that students are able to complete their Bachelor’s degree. By raising this awareness, educators will be able to provide the necessary support to first-generation students by setting them up to succeed early on in their high school years.
Approximately 56% of African Americans students graduate from high school and enroll at a 4-year college or university (Owens, Lacey, Rawls & Holbert-Quince, 2010). However, there is a large gap in the enrollment rates of White and African American college students (Bennett & Xie, 2000). In the fall of 2015, nearly 55% of undergraduate students in the United States were White, while just under 18% were Black (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Overall, White students continue to enroll in college at a higher rate than African American students do (Hoffman & Snyder, 2003), giving White students an advantage with regard to their future socioeconomic status and employment opportunities. African American students graduate at the slowest rate of all other ethnicities, have been found to be less academically prepared for the rigor of college courses, and have limited information about the college process in general (Thayer, 2000).

The goal of this study is to illustrate to educators what students who are both first-generation and African American face when transitioning from high school to college. The specific audience that would benefit most from this research are college counselors at the high school and college level since they work very closely with students as they make the transition from high school to college. This study will enable counselors to be more informed about the struggles that this population faces, as well as the unique knowledge that this population can bring to a college campus. If college counselors at both the secondary and post-secondary level are more informed, the hope is that the particular population will receive the support they need to be successful in obtaining a college education. This research could also be helpful to those who work at non-profits that guide high school students through the college process.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

Much of the literature about first-generation students and African American students focuses on the barriers they face and how they overcome them in order to be successful
academically (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hutchens, Deffendall & Peabody, 2011; Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008). This study will focus primarily on the experiences of students who identify as first-generation, African American students, and how community cultural wealth impacted their college readiness. The research question this study seeks to answer is “What role does community cultural wealth play in impacting African American, first-generation students’ level of college readiness?”

**Definition of Key Terminology**

**African-American/Black:** Individuals of African descent. For purposes of this study, these terms are interchangeable.

**College knowledge:** Having knowledge of what to expect throughout the college admissions process, from the application process to matriculation (Conley, 2008a).

**College readiness:** This study will use the definition outlined by Conley (2008b), which defined college readiness as successful enrollment in an introductory or general education course without remediation at a 2-year, 4-year, vocational or trade school.

**First-generation:** Students whose parents did not complete a post-secondary degree, and would be the first in their immediate family to receive a college degree (Ishitani, 2006).

**Self-efficacy:** Also referred to as student ownership, self-efficacy is defined as an individual’s perceived capability in performing necessary tasks to achieve goals (Bandura, as cited in Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2013).

**Traditional-aged:** Refers to the typical ages of a first-time, first-year college student: 18 to 22 years old (Adelman, 2005).
The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of community cultural wealth, which will serve as the theoretical framework for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that will be used in this study is community cultural wealth, which is a critical race theory based response to the concept of cultural capital. First, a brief overview of cultural capital and critical race theory will be presented, followed by an overview and analysis of community cultural wealth.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) examines race and its relationship with American society and theory, pointing out that race is still a significant factor of inequity in today’s society. CRT, created by Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both professors of law, is an offshoot of the concept of critical legal studies, from which it borrowed the idea of legal indeterminacy—the idea that all legal cases do not have one correct answer. The examination of the relationship between power and the construction of social roles was taken from radical feminist thought. Lastly, the idea of redressing historical wrongs was borrowed from civil rights thought (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The tenets of critical race theory are that racism is (a) “ordinary…the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7) and (b) the belief that it materially benefits White elites and psychically disadvantages working class whites people, and most of society feels little need to change the system; and (c) is a social construction, as is race. Critical race theory also recognizes (a) the importance of intersectionality and anti-essentialism (that no one person has one true, easily stated identity); (b) the importance of the “voice of color” thesis, that being a minority gives one the presumed competence to speak about race and racism, and (c) that the shifting role
of differential racism, where different minority groups are racialized by the dominant society in different ways at different times in history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

Critical race theory is used in education as a way to examine educational issues of inequality, such as exclusions in curriculum, achievement, and testing and tracking (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and is a framework that can be used to examine the ways race and racism impacts society (Yosso, 2005). Yosso thoroughly outlined the use of critical race theory within education, and discussed a brief historical timeline of critical theory, which expanded to include further marginalized groups in specific types of critical race theory, including AsianCrit, FemCrit, LatCrit, TribalCrit. WhiteCrit was included in this timeline as well, as it is used to describe White scholars who are examining and challenging White privilege (p. 71). Yosso’s focus on reframing a theory that places communities of color at a disadvantage is rooted in the scholarly work of Daniel Solórzano, who argued that the five areas of critical race theory that “should inform theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum and policy: (a) the intercentricity of race and racism; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches (Solórzano, 1998, as cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 73). The idea of community cultural wealth can also be viewed as a response to Gloria Anzaldua’s call to people of color to change the process of theorization.

Yosso’s article compliments the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Delores Delgado Bernal, both of whom challenged people to answer the question of “whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted?” (Yosso, 2005, p. 69) through their work on using the margins of society as places where empowerment can occur (Yosso, 2005). With community cultural capital, the knowledge of communities of color is considered, and placed at the forefront
of discussion. Yosso’s work also complements Du Bois’ (1965) idea of “double consciousness” from his seminal work, *Souls of Black Folks*. Double consciousness is defined as “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others (p. 9). While Du Bois was specifically discussing the experiences of African Americans, the idea of double consciousness can be extended to all students of color who often have to think outside of themselves through assimilation in order to learn how to navigate educational system and society as a whole. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness ties into Yosso’s statement that the educational system essentially rewards students who assimilate into mainstream culture, while further marginalizing those who do not.

**Community Cultural Wealth versus Cultural Capital**

Community cultural wealth (CCW) is a critical race theory based response to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital. As a “solution” to deficit model thinking and the “banking” education method, which is often used as a way to describe why people of color perform at a lower level of academic performance compared to White students, cultural capital theory suggests that increasing their social capital is one way to bridge that gap and compensate for the knowledge and skills they are “lacking” (Yosso, 2005). The idea of the banking method ties back directly to the historical context of the history of Blacks and education. In his theory of cultural capital, Bourdieu (1977) argued that the knowledge base of members of the upper and middle class are considered capital in society. Individuals who are not born into either of those classes are typically able to access social mobility through education. From this definition of cultural capital, it follows that if someone is not middle or upper class, their knowledge is not considered capital. In the words of Ladson-Billings and Delgado Bernal, these forms of knowledge are considered discounted: “the assumption follows that People of Color ‘lack’ the social and cultural capital required for social mobility” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70).
Under this model, students of color are often said to have “deficits” that prevent them from gaining the knowledge necessary for them to perform at the same level academically as White students. Much of the educational system in the United States is organized around trying to get students of color to the same level of White students as opposed to focusing on the skills and knowledge that they bring to a classroom environment in a positive and empowering way. Community cultural wealth, on the other hand, focuses on what students of color bring to the classroom instead of what they do not, and enables them to feel empowered. This section will serve as a brief introduction to community cultural wealth and will illustrate how it has been used to examine college readiness within education.

Yosso argues that Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital consists of “a very narrow range of assets and characteristics” of what is valuable (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Yosso defines community cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77).

According to Yosso, cultural capital focuses on the “deficits” that communities of color have, and, within education, those deficits have been used to explain achievement gaps between Whites and students of color. Yosso asserts that cultural capital focuses on the deficits as opposed to the cultural knowledge, skills and abilities—community cultural wealth—that communities of color have:

Therefore, while Bourdieu’s work sought to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor. This interpretation of Bourdieu exposes White, middle class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of ‘culture’ are judged in comparison to this ‘norm’. In other words, cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society (Yosso, 2005, p. 76).
**CCW in education.** By discussing community cultural wealth, Yosso offers a response to the theory of cultural capital that can be used within education and beyond. Yosso argues that the cultural wealth of communities of color are nurtured through six types of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. Aspirational capital describes having hopes and dreams, despite facing obstacles. Navigational capital refers to one’s ability to navigate various social institutions, while social capital is defined as “networks of people and community resources (p. 79). Linguistic capital refers the skills that are honed as a result of understanding more than one language, and familial capital is the cultural knowledge that is shared by a family. Resistant capital is the knowledge created by challenging inequality (Yosso, 2005). The six forms of capital discussed are particularly important because the various forms of capital can apply to all communities of color, despite each community’s unique contributions to society. This study will focus specifically on navigational, aspirational, resistant, social and familial capital.

**Latinos.** Community cultural wealth has been used primarily to examine the academic success of Latino students. DeNicolo, González, Morales, and Romaní (2015) utilized community cultural wealth as a way for third graders to examine their lives culturally and linguistically both in school and outside of it through the use of testimonios, which the authors defined as “counternarratives of students’ individual and collective experiences” (p. 230). The participants in the study showed signs of aspirational and linguistic capital in the third grades; one of the themes that emerged were wanting to be bilingual to help translate for their family. The participants also recognized the importance of learning English in order to be able to navigate within society (navigational capital). Lastly, the third graders also cited use of consejos (advice) from their family as a way to fuel their quest for learning and becoming bilingual. Perez
(2014) used community cultural wealth to examine the academic and social experiences of two Latino male students at predominantly white institutions. Perez found that the two participants relied on linguistic capital as a way to cope with racial microaggressions, navigational capital when interacting with their peers, and resistant capital as a way to overcome stereotypic views of Latinos.

Luna and Martinez (2013) applied community cultural wealth as a lens to understand Latino educational experiences. The authors interviewed 15 students who were high school graduates and enrolled in a four-year college of university. Through the use of focus groups, the authors found that the students frequently used ethnically or culturally based knowledge, skills or abilities to succeed academically and overcome macro and microaggressions, and made specific use of aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital. The participants stated that their parents had had high aspirations for them, and, as a result, aspired to attend college as a way to do “something meaningful in life” (Luna & Martinez, 2013). Participants also noted that familial capital played a role in their academic success, and stated that their family provided them with high expectations, encouragement in the forms of advice, stories and hard work. Participants also stated they utilized their own networks of people, contacts and community resources as a way to tap into their social capital. Participants discussed how attending schools with an emphasis on creating an environment where all students expect to attend college (often referred to as a “college going culture”) put enrolling in college at the forefront of their mind, and they also discussed how they looked for the guidance and support of other Latino students who were successful academically as a key to their success. (Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez, and Cooper’s (2009) research on Latino college going networks had similar findings). Lastly, participants discussed how they used navigational capital to overcome obstacles. In addition to crediting their support
networks with directing them through the college application process, participants also discussed how navigational capital helped them overcome academic obstacles, such as being pegged by educators as not being college material.

Various types of capital have been used to discuss the academic success of both African American and Latino students. Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, and Klingsmith (2014) studied 22 community college African American and Latino students who were performing successfully at the community college level. They found that each of these students utilized social capital through building relationships with faculty, gaining support from their family, and through campus engagement. All students also had their own level of personal determination that enabled them to be successful regardless of any obstacles they faced—an example of aspirational capital.

African Americans. Recent research has applied community cultural wealth specifically to African American students as well. Holland (2016) interviewed 49 Black college students to examine the role of similar-aged community members—specifically colleagues, family members, parishioners and friends—impacted their college knowledge and enrollment. Holland found that the participants utilized aspirational capital by remaining steadfast in their goal of attending college, familial capital by speaking with their peers who had completed the college process before them, and navigational capital by relying on family, friends, and peers to help them navigate the college process largely on their own. The participants also used resistant capital differently: as a way to dispel stereotypes of their race, but also as a way to inspire others by serving as a positive role model to other individuals. Jayakumar, Vue and Allen (2013) used community cultural wealth to explore college access for middle and high income African American high school students who participated in Young Black Scholars (YBS), a college preparatory program in Los Angeles. The authors found that participants involvement YBS
enabled them to have access to the various forms of cultural capital, specifically aspirational, navigational, and social. The authors found the YBS provided students with more support during the college admissions process than their high school did, by providing SAT and ACT workshops, informational sessions about applying to college, visits to college campuses and access to mentors and peers who were also focused on attending college. Thus, the support provided by YBS nurtured the participants’ community cultural wealth. The authors also found that the participants’ “embrace college-going as an act of resistance to deficit-based narratives regarding the racial achievement gap and social reproduction (p. 551).”

Lastly, there has also been research that explores how educators can use community cultural wealth within the classroom. Liou, Martinez and Rotheram-Fuller (2016) completed a year-long ethnographic study of students of color who faced various academic challenges. The students offered their viewpoint on ways to improve schools, and cited the importance of mentoring as a way to nurture students’ navigational and aspirational capital. The participants cited clear guidance and support from their teachers as the best way to help them develop their own capital and become more aware of their community cultural wealth.

Community cultural wealth serves as a critical race theory based response to the theory of cultural capital, and enables communities who are often marginalized to be at the forefront of discussion. Within education, it has been used as a tool to empower students and resist the idea of deficit thinking. It has been used to examine the experiences faced by Latinos and African Americans, and recent research speaks to how educators can incorporate the principles of community cultural wealth into the classroom.
Primary Critiques of CRT

Since community cultural wealth is a response to cultural capital based on critical race theory, there is little criticism of it within education specifically. However, critical race theory has been criticized in the legal community primarily because of its focus on personal experiences as opposed to grounding itself in logic, which could also be extended to criticism of using CRT within a qualitative study. Posner (1997), a judge for the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago, referred to critical race theorists as the “‘lunatic core’ of radical legal egalitarianism,” and stated that it “turns its back on…rational inquiry, forswearing analysis for narrative. By repudiating reasoned argumentation, the storytellers reinforce stereotypes about the intellectual capacities of nonwhites.” Pyle (1998) referred to critical race theory as “an attack”…on “the very foundations of the [classical] liberal legal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism and neutral principles of constitutional law. These liberal values, they allege, have no enduring basis in principles, but are mere social constructs calculated to legitimate white supremacy. The rule of law, according to critical race theorists, is a false promise of principled government, and they have lost patience with false promises (pp. 787-788).

Another critique of CRT is that its focus on personal experience and race evoke emotion from the reader, rather than focusing on the strength of legal arguments. Subotnik (1998) highlighted criticisms of CRT:

…many critical race theorists end up writing about themselves on the ground that their personal experience is unique and that there is something special that they can contribute because they are black, Latino, Asian, and so on. So instead of writing an article on why a particular law is wrong or unconstitutional, the critical race scholar provides a "raced" or "situated" analysis…” (p. 516).
Further, Subotnik was concerned that storytelling was not a compelling form of a basis of a sound argument: “While it may be useful for lawyers to see the facts of a case as a narrative construction, or even to think of the law itself as a work of fiction, lawyers must look beyond stories to questions of doctrine, policy, and argument” (p. 521). He further argued that critical race theory’s reliance on narratives focuses more on emotion, as opposed to the indisputable nature of more scientific research.

One of the essential themes of CRT is giving a voice to people of color—those who are routinely removed from the narrative of dominant culture. CRT also provides a space for acknowledging the racial inequality within society, and providing solutions to ending inequality. The most common critique of critical race theory is that it relies too heavily on narrative. However, it is through the public sharing of experiences by those impacted by inequality that equality is achieved. By enabling traditionally marginalized members of society to have a voice, they become part of the narrative, and their knowledge is no longer discounted.

**Rationale for use of Framework**

Given that both African American and first-generation students are often depicted in a manner that highlights their lack of knowledge and skills in a negative way instead of highlighting what knowledge and skills they do have, utilizing the community cultural framework will reframe the conversation regarding these students in a more positive and empowering light.

The framework of community cultural wealth will shape the study significantly. The approach for this research will be qualitative because it is focusing on the experiences of individuals. Because of its focus on the experiences of African American, first-generation students, this research will specifically utilize a narrative approach, so as to capture a sense of
how this population perceives its own level of college readiness. The interview questions will revolve around the six different types of capital outlined by Yosso, and the thematic analysis of the data will also be organized around those types of capital.

Research often stresses that one of the reasons that both African American and first-generation students separately face difficulty graduating from college is because they lack the cultural capital of non-first-generation students whose parents have graduated from college and can share their knowledge of the process with their children (Choy, 2001; Reid & Moore, 2008). Because this study will be examining the self-perceptions of students who are part of a population that completes college at a lower rate than their peers, it would be beneficial to frame this study through the lens of several of the forms of capital outlined in community cultural wealth. While the students being interviewed for this research do lack college knowledge in the traditional sense, they do use their other forms of capital—specifically aspirational, social, resistant, navigational and familial—as a way to turn their perceived deficits into strengths.

The community cultural wealth framework has often been used within education to examine the success of Latino and African American college students. This framework will be used to examine the impact that the various forms of capital included in community cultural wealth have on the self-perceptions of college readiness of first-generation, African American students. Since the student experience is being examined, a narrative approach would be best. Because this research is also being used to highlight what first-generation African American students bring to college as opposed to the “deficits” that they bring to college, a critical race theory approach with a focus on community cultural capital would be best. One of the strengths of community cultural wealth is that it approaches research through a non-dominant lens. It does not accept the status quo. Instead, it seeks to challenge it and reframe the question. This
theoretical framework also seeks to empower individuals—specifically in regards to this problem of practice—in that it does not highlight what they do not have access to, and instead highlights their strengths.

**Chapter Summary**

College readiness is an issue of national concern that impacts quality of life. First-generation and Black students are among the least college ready populations in the nation, yet there is no research that examines the experiences of students who are in both groups.

Aligned with the tenets of critical race theory, community cultural wealth enables students from marginalized populations to have their stories and experiences placed at the forefront. Critical race theory is a means of examining and rejecting the idea of deficit thinking and other research that contributes to the silencing of the voices of people of color. In line with that principle, this study will utilize a narrative approach that will enable first-generation, African American students to have the opportunity to have their voices heard and inform the research. The use of the community cultural framework will provide insight into how the community that first-generation, African American students are a part of prepares them to both enter and remain in college. The next chapter will provide an overview of the literature as it pertains to college readiness, first-generation college students, and African American college students.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of community cultural wealth on the self-perceptions of first-generation, African American college students’ level of college readiness. A high level of college readiness increases a student’s chances of becoming a college graduate, and can impact one’s life greatly. Students who are underprepared for college are less likely to complete a college degree, which impacts their earning potential and the country’s growing economic need for a more highly skilled workforce (Callan, et al., 2006; Carnevale, 2007). Overall, both first-generation and African American students perform poorly on traditional college readiness measurements (Bui, 2002; Byrd & MacDonald, 2010; Reid & Moore, 2008; ACT, 2016; 2015 SAT College Readiness Report, 2015).

Based on the traditional measurements of college readiness alone, first-generation, African American students would not perform well in college or attain a college degree. This illustrates that there is a broader level of college readiness that extends beyond traditional college readiness. However, some of these students are able to succeed academically; this, again, underscores a gap in the traditional measurements of college readiness. While there is a wealth of research regarding the characteristics and best ways to support first-generation students overall (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hutchens, Deffendall & Peabody, 2011), as well as first-generation Latino college students specifically (Saunders & Serna, 2004; Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006; Boden, 2011; Nunez, 2011), there is little research addressing the college readiness of African American, first-generation students and how to best prepare that population for college. Given all of the unique obstacles that African American and first-generation college students face separately, it is important to understand the obstacles faced by students who identify as both African American and first-generation if there is hope to increase the college readiness of all students.
For students who are both first-generation and African American, what is it that enables them to succeed when the measures that traditionally predict college readiness say they are not college ready? This literature review will discuss college readiness through the lens of community cultural wealth, and will first discuss college readiness and the ways it has traditionally been measured—through the use of standardized tests and high school academic preparation and performance. Next, it will discuss how first-generation and African American students perform on these traditional measures. Again, each of those populations is presented separately because there is little research that focuses on the intersectionality of being both African American and first-generation. The final two sections will focus on contextual skills and awareness and academic behaviors, how first-generation and African American students develop these skills, and how they can increase those aspects of college readiness through the use of community cultural wealth. Those two steps of skills will be the primary focus of this literature review because, while the traditional elements of college readiness can be easily measured, this study emphasizes skills and concepts that can best be understood using a qualitative approach.

**College Readiness**

Over the years, college readiness has been defined in a multitude of ways, and is deemed a crucial factor in creating a smooth transition for students from high school to college. Again, this literature review will use Conley’s (2008b) definition of college readiness:

…the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences prepare a student to be successful when enrolled in an introductory or general education course without remediation at a 2-year, 4-year, vocational or trade school, with successful being defined as completing entry-level courses at a level of understanding and proficiency that makes it possible for the student to consider taking the next course in the sequence of the next level course in the subject area.

Conley (2007) argued that the college-ready student envisioned by this definition is able to understand what is expected in a college course, can cope with the content knowledge that is presented, and can take key lessons away from the course. The likelihood that students will make
a successful transition to the college environment, Conley (2007) noted, is often a function of their readiness; the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped them for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college.

However, college readiness is determined by more than just knowledge and skills, and extends to curriculum taken, academic, cognitive strategies and knowledge about the college process (Tierney, 2014). Conley’s definition of college readiness incorporates factors both within and outside the high school environment, and thus is a more complete manner in which to determine a student’s level of college readiness. This new model of college readiness focuses on four main areas: key cognitive strategies, key content areas, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. Since the first two elements of Conley’s model align with the traditional measures of college readiness, the latter two areas of college readiness will be addressed in later sections of the literature review.

Key cognitive strategies are defined as the skills and knowledge required in order to ensure that students can meet the rigor of college academics. The key cognitive skills that impact college success are analysis, intellectual openness, interpretation, inquisitiveness, precision and accuracy, problem-solving, and reasoning (Conley, 2008b). Key content areas are the subjects (English, math, science, world languages, and the arts) used to develop foundational skills of students through teaching and learning. Academic behaviors are defined as a set of abilities that relate to how students create self-awareness and self-monitor themselves academically. Contextual skills and awareness refer to increasing the student’s understanding and knowledge of the college process and college itself.
Traditional Measurements of College Readiness

Since college readiness has become a major initiative at both the federal and state level, “more and more education initiatives have focused on defining, measuring and improving the college readiness of high school students” (Wiley, Wyatt & Camara, 2011, p. 5). When race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status are considered, the disparities in student’s level of college readiness become more apparent. Research shows that White and Asian students are more likely to enroll in a rigorous curriculum than Black or Latino students (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Research indicates that students from high socioeconomic status (SES) participate in rigorous courses at a higher level than students from a low SES. This research contributes to the finding that students from lower SES are underrepresented at highly selective institutions because they have not taken the necessary rigor of coursework (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). This research illustrates that a student’s level of high school preparation remains a key factor in the level of their success in college.

However, more recent research now recognizes that those traditional measurements do not illustrate a full picture of college readiness (Adelman, 2006; Conley, 2008b; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2009; Wiley et al., 2010; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). There has recently been a shift in the way that college readiness has been measured. Early literature focused on traditional measurements, such as academic performance in high school and standardized test scores. However, the exploration of measures outside of the high school environment have recently been explored by college readiness researchers (Thomas, Kuncel, & Crede, 2007; Ramsey, 2008), and recognize that factors outside of academics impact a student’s level of college readiness. The field of college readiness indicators now includes noncognitive measures, which have been defined by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) as “measures [which] evaluate such
characteristics as adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions, which are not measureable using typical standardized tests” (Sedlacek, 2005, as cited in Ramsey, 2008, p. 2).

**High school academic preparation.** Traditionally, a student’s high school grade point average, class rank and standardized test scores were used to determine a student’s level of college readiness (Greene & Forster, 2003; Kuh, 2007; Wiley et al., 2010). However, the academic rigor of a student’s high school curriculum is tied most closely to a greater probability of entering and finishing college (Adelman, 2006; Attewell & Domina, 2008). If a student has enrolled in college preparatory courses and performed well academically, it is more likely that those results will translate over into their college level work. Adelman (2006) analyzed high school transcripts and found that completing a challenging high school curriculum is the greatest pre-collegiate indicator of Bachelor’s degree completion, and the impact is even greater for Black and Hispanic students than White students. However, this assumes that the courses that students take and the names of those courses are accurate and rigorous enough for success in college (Callan, et al., 2006). Wagner (2006) discussed that while titles may appear standardized and familiar on transcripts, there is a lack of “alignment between what is required to get into college vs. what’s needed to stay in college and succeed as an adult” (as cited in Conley, 2008b, p. 8).

Researchers have consistently found that the rigor of a high school curriculum impacts a student’s standardized test scores—another traditional measurement of college readiness. High school curriculum also impacts high school graduation, likelihood of entering college, type of college entered, college academic performance, college graduation and wages earned (Altonji, 1995; Rose & Betts, 2004; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Adelman, 2006; and Attewell & Domina, 2008).
In conjunction with high school course rigor, research has shown that a student’s academic performance in high school is the best predictor of college readiness and whether or not a student will earn a college degree. Adelman (1999) investigated the pathways that contribute to college completion. His findings described how academic intensity in high school curricula is a stronger predictor of students’ college degree attainment than student test scores or class rank. More specifically, Adelman (1999) found that a student’s highest level of mathematics taken in high school has the strongest influence on college completion relative to any other predictor. However, research has shown that high schools which serve majority low-income students offer fewer advanced courses than schools that serve students with a higher socioeconomic status (Adelman, 1999; Long, et al., 2012). Both first-generation and African American students are likely to be raised in low-income homes (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). While recent efforts have been made by the federal government to ensure that there is more equal access to advanced curricula, further research has inferred that disparities in enrollment in advanced courses by demographic characteristics are related to inequalities that exist within a school rather than across schools (Gamoran, 1987). This suggests that these gaps in access are mainly due to tracking or to inequalities in access to more demanding courses within the school itself (Attewell & Domina, 2008).

Enrollment in rigorous courses aside from Math and English also lead to higher level of college readiness. Long et al. (2012) completed an analysis of high school transcripts, and found a 7 to 11 percent increase in the likelihood of high school graduation and entrance into a four-year college between a student who took no rigorous high school courses and a student who took just one rigorous course in high school. Similar to Adelman, Long et al. (2012) found that the largest differences in student outcomes depends on Math and English course performance.
Long’s research also found that the greatest differences in outcomes were between those who took no rigorous courses in high school versus those who took just one rigorous course.

Enrollment in dual enrollment programs—where students are allowed to enroll in college level courses while still enrolled in high school—are another way to strengthen college readiness. An (2013) found that students who participated in a dual enrollment program had higher grade point averages than students who did not, and were also less likely to require remediation courses. In her study of African American college students, Freeman (1997) found that students who took college preparatory courses, such as Advanced Placement courses, indicated that those courses were instrumental in helping them making a successful transition from high school to college. Students noted that teachers who challenged them academically in these courses were instrumental in their success in these courses in high school, as well as once they took similar courses in college.

An (2013) also found that students from a low-socioeconomic status benefitted from dual enrollment programs as much as students from a high socioeconomic status. Ganzert (2014) also found that participation in a dual enrollment program increased a student’s grade point average and that it positively impacted a student’s likelihood to graduate. This aligns with the previously discussed research that a student’s high school grade point average is the strongest predictor of college success.

**Standardized tests.** The second traditional measurement of college readiness is standardized test scores, primarily the SAT and ACT standardized examinations. Both the SAT and ACT have benchmark scores, which is the minimum score required for a student to be deemed college ready. The benchmark scores for the ACT are 18 in English, 22 in Math, 22 in Reading, and 23 in Science (ACT, 2017), while the benchmark score for the SAT is 1550, or 500
on each section of Critical Reading, Math, and Writing (SAT, 2011). The SAT was redesigned in 2016, and the SAT benchmarks discussed here are for the SAT in use prior to March 2016.

However, despite the existence of these benchmarks, both the SAT and ACT stress that a better indicator of a student’s college readiness is their performance in college level courses. There are also researchers, as well as educators, who believe that standardized tests are not true predictors of college readiness. Armstrong (1999) and King, Rasool, and Judge (1994) studies’ revealed standardized scores are not a strong predictor of college success. In addition, Armstrong’s (1999) study showed "little or no relationship between [placement] test scores and student performance in class" (p. 36).

**How Black and First-generation students perform on traditional measurements**

Both Black and first-generation college students are two populations that are consistently amongst the least college ready populations (U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Bui, 2002; ACT, 2016; SAT College Readiness Report, 2015). Overall, both populations score poorly on standardized exams and struggle academically when they get to college (Bui, 2002; Byrd & MacDonald, 2010; Reid & Moore, 2008; ACT, 2016; SAT College Readiness Report, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This section will examine the college readiness of first-generation and African American college students separately, as no published research has been found that examines the college readiness of students who are both first-generation and African American.

**How being first-generation impacts readiness**. Overall, first-generation students face more challenges when they enter college compared to their non-first-generation peers (Bui, 2002; Riehl, 1994). Individuals whose parents do not have a college education are less likely to succeed academically than those who parents did receive a college education (U.S. Department
of Education; 2001; Bui, 2002). In addition to first-generation students being overwhelmingly students of color, many first-generation students enroll in remedial level courses in high school, which delay their entry into college preparatory courses. This places them at a disadvantage when they begin to apply to college as they often have not taken the required amount of coursework to meet the admission requirements (Reid & Moore, 2008).

Research has shown that being a first-generation student alone is a risk factor with regard to college readiness. U.S. Department of Education’s (2001) study on first-generation students illustrated that parents’ highest level of education earned was significant for access to higher education, persistence and completion, even when other factors were excluded. However, when being a first-generation college student is combined with other factors such as race or socio-economic status, the need for support increases, and the likelihood of graduating from college decreases (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). These challenges make them more susceptible to performing poorly academically (Bui, 2002) and can make the transition from high school student to college student more difficult (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Byrd and MacDonald’s (2010) study of first-generation students at a community college, revealed that more than half of the students interviewed highlighted reading and writing skills as vital to their preparation for college level coursework. First-generation students interviewed by Reid and Moore (2008) indicated that enrollment in these courses gave them an advantage once they reached college because they already had an idea of what college coursework looked like. In some instances, taking those advanced courses in high school enabled students to test out of college introductory level courses. However, enrollment in these courses alone does not guarantee that a student is college ready (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).
First-generation students who felt academically prepared for college noted the importance of participating in programs designed for disadvantaged students as instrumental in increasing their level of college readiness (Reid & Moore, 2008). These programs, such as the federal TRiO programs, offer summer bridge programs where students enroll in academic courses to prepare them for college, and also provide support during the college admissions process. Participation in these programs enable first-generation students to gain the college knowledge that they do not have access to otherwise. Oftentimes, these programs educate students regarding the college process, and offer instructions regarding the different types of colleges, how to find the best fit, and how to apply for financial aid (Kallison & Stader, 2012). Students interviewed by Reid and Moore (2008) indicated that involvement in such programs made them feel more well-rounded as students, and provided them with insight into the college environment beyond academics.

Contrary to previous findings, Zalaquett (1999) found no difference in GPA between first-generation and traditional college students. This suggests that other factors could be influencing academic performance. Zalaquett hypothesized that students’ similar comfort level with the college environment accounted for the similarity in grade point average between the two groups (first-generation vs. non-first-generation college students). Thus, students’ internal experience mediated the relationship with their generational status and their academic performance. In addition, despite the obstacles many first-generation college students encounter, many do persist in achieving the goal of graduation. This study in particular underscores the importance of non-academic factors when determining the college readiness of first-generation students.

**How being African American impacts readiness.** African American students are also often under prepared for the rigor of college coursework. They are less college ready than any
other demographic, and are graduating at the lowest rate as well. When considering standardized test results, African American students perform at the lowest levels amongst all ethnicities, and are most likely to enroll in remedial level coursework as first-year undergraduates, which indicates that students are not prepared to enter directly into college level courses (ACT, 2016; SAT College Readiness Report, 2015; U.S Department of Education, 2013).

Through its own research, ACT has found that students who take the recommended core curriculum of four year of English, three years each of math, social studies and science are more likely to be college ready than those who are not (ACT, 2016). However, even when African American students took those recommended courses, only 33% met the English benchmark, compared to 61% for all students (ACT, 2016). While the benchmark for the SAT is a combined score of 1550, or a minimum score of 500 on each section, only 16.1% of African Americans met or exceeded that benchmark (SAT College Readiness Report, 2015). The average score for African American test takers was 1277, compared to 1654 for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 1576 for White students, 1423 for American Indian/Alaska Native, 1343 for Mexican/Mexican Americans, 1347 for Puerto Ricans and 1345 for other Hispanic, Latino, or Latin Americans (SAT Report, 2015).

In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education found that Black first-year undergraduate students reported the highest levels of enrollment in remedial courses during the academic years of 2003-2004 and 2007-2008, at 27.4% and 30.2% respectively, compared to 19.7% and 19.9 percent for White students, 26.8% and 29% for Hispanic students, and 20.1% and 22.5% for Asian students. Students who are considered college ready do not require enrollment in remedial level courses. Enrollment in remedial courses has a negative effect on college completion (Wiley et al., 2010; Conley, 2008b). Students who enroll in remedial courses are more likely to take
longer to finish their degree. Enrollment in remedial courses also increases the likelihood that they will not graduate from college (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Adelman 1999). In addition, many African American students enroll in remedial level courses in high school, which delay their entry into college preparatory courses. This places them at a disadvantage when they begin to apply to college as they often have not taken the coursework required to meet the admission requirements, or find themselves overwhelmed by their college courses (Reid & Moore, 2008). African Americans and Latinos are more likely to attend high-poverty schools than Asian Americans and Caucasians, which means that they are attending schools where 76-100% of the student population is eligible for free or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), only 20.8% of African American students seeking a Bachelor’s degree in 2007 on a full-time basis graduated from the first institution they attended, compared to 43.3% for White students and 29.8% for Latino students. Of first-time African American students who started at a public, four-year college, 39% graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in six years, compared to the overall graduation rate of 53 percent.

Many students of color are either first-generation or first-time college students and, thus, face the challenge of not having a reference to navigate the higher education system (Goodall, 2009). In 2007-2008, 49% of African American undergraduate students were also first-generation (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), 41% of African American children lived in a home where their parents had a high school diploma or less level of education.
Summary

College readiness has traditionally been measured by focusing on high school academic preparation and performance on standardized tests. Both first-generation and Black students score on the lowest levels of these measurements.

More recent research has shown that these traditional measurements of college readiness are lacking. First, it is possible for students who perform poorly on both standardized measurements to be successful in college. Second, the traditional measurements of college readiness do not acknowledge individual traits that can support or impede a student from being successful in college. Lastly, the traditional measurements do not include factors that exist outside of the classroom that can impact one’s level of college readiness, such as a student’s socioeconomic status, their familial responsibilities, or the resources of the school district that the student attends.

Newer research has shown that both first-generation and African American students rely on other concepts as a way to increase their own level of college readiness. These factors—college knowledge, learning and adjusting to new environment and expectations, self-efficacy, support from adults, and using personal experiences as motivation—focus more on the innate traits and qualities that students have, and can directly influence a student’s academic behaviors or contextual skills and awareness. However, these measures can be examined through the lens of community cultural wealth, and viewed as a way for first-generation, African American students to improve their college readiness and gather the tools necessary by using their cultural wealth to be successful in college. The following sections will discuss how first-generation and African American students utilize various forms of capital to increase their college readiness, specifically as it relates to their contextual skills and awareness and academic behaviors.
Contextual Skills and Awareness

Both first-generation and African American students’ contextual skills and awareness are shaped by their level of college knowledge and socioeconomic status. Both populations use navigational, social and familial capital as a way to increase their contextual skills and awareness through gaining college knowledge and adjusting to new environments and expectations in college.

College Knowledge

A high level of contextual skills and awareness during high school provides students with insight into what to expect once they enroll in college, and provides them with the “college knowledge” that they would otherwise lack. The college admissions process, especially the process of applying for financial aid, has been described extensively as a barrier to the postsecondary environment, especially for underrepresented students (Roderick et al., 2009; Reid & Moore, 2008; Lundell et al., 2004; Collier & Morgan, 2008).

In a 2009 study conducted by Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca on college readiness in urban high school students, the authors provide compelling evidence that a lack of college knowledge accounts for some portion of the disparity in college readiness by income, and race/ethnicity. They also suggest that improved college knowledge may be of particular relevance in the high school reform movement. Early college programs from their very first interaction with their students convey high expectations for college. Additionally, early college students are enrolled in college courses on college campuses sometimes as early as the 7th grade, thereby providing practical real-life experience of what it means to meet college expectations and to learn college culture (Nodine, 2009).
Socioeconomic Status

A lack of contextual skills and awareness is also tied to a lack of understanding of the cost of college. Research has shown that first-generation students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to overestimate the costs of attending college and are more likely to have inaccurate knowledge of actual college costs, while non-first-generation families are more likely to accurately predict college costs due to their previous knowledge (Grodsky & Jones, 2004). For example, recent studies have found that well-informed 11th graders overestimate actual college costs by 5% whereas parents without basic college knowledge overestimate costs by up to 228% (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Knowledge of financial aid for college also varies by race and ethnicity. The Sallie Mae Fund reported in 2003 that 3 out of 4 African American parents do not identify scholarships as a source of aid, compared to half of White parents. Similarly, 83% of Latino parents do not mention grants as a source of aid versus 58% of White parents (Grimes & David, 1997).

Socioeconomic status also influences a student’s level of college readiness, as finances impact whether or not a student can afford test preparation for the SATs or ACTs, or whether they enroll in a public or private high school. Both first-generation and African American students face socioeconomic hardships that impact their knowledge of the college process (An, 2013; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). First-generation students also face financial difficulties due to socioeconomic status and the rising costs of higher education. Bui (2002) found that a significant portion of first-generation college students encountered challenges with respect to being predominantly from a lower socioeconomic status, coming from an underrepresented ethnic group, and having English as their second language.
In a study of the persistence behaviors of first-generation college students and their graduation rates, Ishitani (2006) found that work study based financial aid had a positive effect on retention, and a positive impact on fourth-year graduation behavior. Lohfink and Paulsen’s 2005 study on the determinants of freshman to sophomore year persistence of first-generation college students found that first-generation college students attending private institutions were 12.3% less likely to persist than their peers. The authors suggest that private institutions, which are often lauded for their resources and smaller class sizes, may not always be the best fit for first-generation college students due to their higher cost than that of public institutions, as well as the challenges associated with interacting with more affluent peers. Furthermore, the authors suggested that requiring lower-income and minority first-generation college students to live on campus may cause them to become disconnected with their family support networks and native cultures.

Given the influence of socioeconomic status and finance in college readiness, it is important to understand how these relate to African American students as well. A recent study by the Century Foundation examined how Black poverty is different from White poverty: African Americans are more likely to live in neighborhood where poverty is the norm. In 2015, 39 percent of African American children under the age of 18 were living below the poverty line (defined as less than $23,624 for a family of four with two related children (Jargowsky, 2014).

African Americans are represented at all income levels, but are clustered on the lower end of the spectrum. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, from 2010-2012, the average Black household income (pretax) was $45,284. About 38% of Black households had an income of $12,500 to $37,499, and about 31% had an income of $37,500 to $87,499, with only 11% earning over $87,500 per year. (Noel, 2014).
Freeman (1997) found that Black students were afraid that they could not afford the cost of college, and thus lost the hope to attempt to try, or did not believe that they would be able to find employment that would be an equal or greater investment of a college education. Bowl (2001) found similar findings. Participants in Freeman’s (1997) study also stated that the lack of a guarantee of finding a well-paying job after spending money on college made them less likely to attend college as opposed to entering the workforce directly. Freeman’s (1997) research is directly related to the lack of knowledge surrounding the college process discussed by Lundell et. al (2004). Byrd and MacDonald (2010) found that first-generation students overall had much difficulty navigating the financial aid process and determining whether or not attending college was a financial option. The 2015 Gallup-Purdue Index report found that four out of five Black college graduates take out loans to pay for their education, compared to less than two-thirds of White graduates. The report also found that Black students who borrow have more student loan debt than their peers. This stems from either a lack of college knowledge and/or being part of a lower socioeconomic status (Howard, 2003).

How CCW can be used to Improve Contextual Skills and Awareness

First-generation and African American students use community cultural wealth—specifically navigational, social, and familial capital—as a way to increase their college readiness is by creating their own networks as a way to improve their college knowledge. First-generation and African American students rely on social, familial and resistant capital to enhance their contextual skills and awareness.

Social and familial capital. While all students rely on various forms of support from family, peers, and adults, both African American and first-generation students rely on these support networks more heavily than their non-first-generation peers because they cannot rely on
their immediate family for information about the college process. Both first-generation and African American students rely on support from others, whether it is their peers, their family or others within their social networks.

Support, whether received from peers or family, is crucial to gaining contextual skills and awareness. Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1991) studied 15,000 high school students and examined the roles of familial values, parenting and attitudes about rewards of success. The African American students who participated in the study stated that not having support from their peers made them have a more negative perspective on the importance of academic success. The authors concluded African American students were in a difficult situation because, even with parents who were supportive of high achievement, parental support was often undermined when the students’ peers were not supportive. Steinberg, et al. posited that African American students face a difficult situation because academic achievement often means being called “not Black enough” or accusations of “acting White” for high academic achievement.

Positive support is especially important for the academic success of African American students. Thomas, Speight and Witherspoon (2007) examined the academic achievement of 86 African American high schoolers through the lens of racial identity and self-esteem. The authors found that African American students who were successful academically had the support of both their family and their peers. In a study of African American high school students, Howard (2003) found that support from parents, teachers and counselors was key in the formation of their academic identity and encouraging them to pursue college. If the adults in their life recognized the importance performing well academically, the students wanted to work to the best of their potential to meet the expectations set for them. However, if adults were not supportive, students were likely to doubt their abilities and not aspire to college. One of the participants in Howard’s
study recounted asking her guidance counselor to grant her permission to enroll in college preparatory courses:

She [the counselor] was like, “you can’t take those classes, they are for college-prep students.” I told her that’s why I wanted to take them, and she said those classes would be too hard for me. I was like, how does she know what’s too hard for me? When you hear somebody say straight out that you are not college material, it makes you think, “What’s the point?” (p. 12)

**Navigational capital.** While the process of applying to college may be a challenge for many students, first-generation college attenders, who do not have the benefit of parental experience in this area, are at a disadvantage when they are applying to college (Reid & Moore, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; U.S Department of Education, 2001b). How students come to know and understand the necessary steps to take regarding college selection, admissions, financing their education, and the college culture may very well be tied to their access and utilization of social capital. Social capital is an asset which is rooted in social relations (Bordieu, 1985; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Lee & Croninger, 1999), and which has the potential to increase and or improve life outcomes for individuals. For students from underrepresented demographic groups, access to social networks and relationships within those networks may be the difference between their being able to go to college or not, irrespective of their academic abilities.

First-generation students are forced to navigate the college process alone because they cannot rely on their parents for knowledge about the process (Fallon, 1997; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Zalaquett, 1999). The U.S. Department of Education (2001b) also reached a similar conclusion and found that first-generation students perceived themselves as less prepared, lacking college knowledge and were more concerned about finances and the cost of college than their non-first-generation counterparts (Bui, 2002; Fallon, 1997). The aforementioned challenges
often translated to a different set of experiences for first-generation students once they were in college.

Upon enrollment in college, first-generation students often recognize that they missed valuable opportunities to prepare for college while enrolled in high school. For example, students who did not take Advanced Placement courses while in high school recognize their importance after enrolling in college level courses—this often contributes to the feeling of being unprepared (Reid & Moore, 2008). This is directly related to the intimidation factor discussed by St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) where students felt intimidated by their peers who they perceived were more knowledgeable and better prepared for college than they were. In addition, Soria and Stebleton (2012) found that first-generation students more frequently faced obstacles not related to academics, such as job and family responsibilities, among other things.

Since first-generation college students do not always have the ability to rely on their family’s knowledge of the college process, first-generation students may find support from other adults, most commonly their high school counselor, teachers or mentors (Reid & Moore, 2008). Non-first-generation student can often rely on their parents and extended family for answers regarding the college process since their families are familiar with the process. Since their parents did not attend college, first-generation students lack the college knowledge that non-first-generation students have access to. In their research involving first-generation students, Byrd and MacDonald (2005) found that the support of counselors was crucial to their success. The participants in their study indicated that they drew encouragement from these adults, and that their encouragement was vital in their pursuit of attending college.

First-generation students also indicated that they received support in pursuit of a college education from their families as well, as their family viewed their pursuit of a higher education
as a source of pride. A lack of support from adults had a negative impact on a student deciding to attend college (Freedman, 1997). This underscores the importance of support from adults, whether from family or outsiders. Students who participated in college preparatory programs enabled students to find an additional level of support through mentorships with adults. Leonard (2013) stated that parental support was crucial in the success of students who participated in an early college program, with 74 students averaging 9.4 college credits/year with a 91% passing rate. In his study, Leonard found that parental support was especially crucial with providing students with emotional guidance.

Summary

Through the use of navigational, social and familial capital, both first-generation and Black students create their own networks and rely on support and advice from their peers and family as a way to help develop college knowledge. By doing so, they are able to increase their contextual skills and awareness and overall level of college readiness.

Academic Behaviors

Academic behaviors tied to success in college can be categorized into two areas: self-monitoring and study skills. Both categories encompass various attributes that represent a student’s self-awareness, self-monitoring and self-control (Conley, 2008b), as well as their ability to prepare for and take exams, be successful with time management, taking useful notes in class, working with academic advisors, and being able to communicate with professors (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). Self-monitoring refers to the ability of a student to make it through a course independently and assess their own competency of the subject matter (Wiley, et al., 2010). Students who self-monitor are able to determine when they are having difficulty with a subject and take the necessary steps to improve. Oftentimes, self-monitoring is dependent on the student learning new behavioral, problem-
solving and coping skills that facilitate the transition into the social and academic demands of college (Roderick et al., 2009; Collier & Morgan, 2008).

African American and first-generation students use navigational capital to help them increase their self-efficacy skills and adjust to the new environment and expectations of a college environment, albeit in varying ways (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Byrd & MacDonald, 2010; Collier & Morgan, 2008). This section will outline how self-efficacy, adjusting to a new environment in college, and using experiences as motivation impact academic behaviors, and how community cultural wealth can also be used to improve readiness. Lastly, it will examine how both populations use navigational capital to help them improve their academic behaviors and increase their level of college readiness.

Self-Efficacy

The contribution of self-efficacy to academic behavior is well developed in the literature (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Elias & Loomis, 2002; Hackett, Betz, Casas, & Rocha-Singh, 1992; Hampton & Mason, 2003; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1986; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Most notably, Chemers et al. (2001) reported that academic self-efficacy was directly related to academic performance of first-year college students, the year in which students encountered the most difficult issues related to transition. Lent et al. (1986) found a positive relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement for college students in technical and scientific majors. Hackett et al. (1992) supported these findings using a college sample of engineering students.

For students who do not have a support system outside of their families, many of them rely on self-efficacy to become college ready and be prepared for college. This drive and ambition to succeed in college is instrumental in a student’s successful transition from high
school to college. College self-efficacy is defined as a student’s confidence in performing a variety of collegial tasks (Solberg, O’Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993).

Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) noted that first-generation students report a higher level of self-efficacy than non-first-generation students. Students with a high degree of self-efficacy view challenges in a positive manner, as opposed to feeling threatened by them, whereas a student’s with low college self-efficacy fear challenges. Many first-generation students build self-efficacy from close relationships with adults which is why a strong support system is a necessity for first-generation students. Without the necessary confidence to succeed, first-generation students may find it difficult to persevere (Pajares & Schunk, 2001).

New environment and expectations

The ease in which college students adapt to the college environment directly impacts their academic behavior. When students enter college, it is important that they have the necessary skills to succeed in their courses. For example, it is imperative that students can write well and craft reasonable arguments while in college. First time college students often have difficulty adjusting to the college environment. Rowser (1997) found that 50% of the students that participated in her study of freshmen indicated that they needed assistance with reading and writing at the college level. However, Collier and Morgan’s (2007) research found that first-generation students are the least prepared within that skillset. It is likely that these gaps in knowledge are due to the difference between the academic demands in high school versus college. Conley argues that the reading, writing and reasoning requirements necessary to be successful in college courses do not correspond to what students have been required to do in high school (Conley, 2008b). Conley (2008b) notes that college is the first time where students are considered adults instead of children, and are expected to act as such. In high school, teachers
can be more lenient, and more flexible. However, once a student enters college, this is often not the case. There is a substantial increase in the amount of homework assigned, and coursework itself is more rigorous. These skills are crucial in college success.

Collier and Morgan (2008) studied expectations from the perspective of faculty and first and second year college students who were first-generation. The authors found that there was a significant gap between faculty expectations of students and what students believed was expected of them by faculty. Faculty often assumed that they were being explicit enough with the instruction given regarding requirements for assignments or that students were able to ascertain what was required. On the other hand, students either discounted what their professor said or reinterpreted it in an incorrect manner, or ended up completing the assignment incorrectly. The students interviewed stated that the time available to complete homework was not based on the number of hours spent in class multiplied by one to three additional hours (as professors argued) but instead on the amount of actual time students had available to complete homework done; professors needed to be more clear about their expectations, especially regarding how to write correctly; and professors needed to recognize that students had other courses with just as demanding course loads, as well as responsibilities external to the course.

One related skill that first-generation students have been found to be lacking in the literature is their ability to manage time efficiently, one of the academic behaviors outlined by Conley. The concern of time management is tied closely to a lack of knowledge of the college environment. Half of the participants in Byrd & MacDonald’s study (2010) stated that they felt underprepared academically due to deficits in time management and the differing academic standards between high school and college. Rosenbaum (2004) found that high school students have little understanding about college experience and what is needed to be successful in college.
Despite frequent attempts to creating a college going culture, students still struggle with fully understanding all aspects (Settersten & Ray, 2010). This is even more true for first-generation students. College expectations remain a significant determinant of student effort (Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011). In their interviews with first-generation students, Reid and Moore (2008) found that the students believed that college required them to think more critically and write more succinctly. Most of the students interviewed in their study were not exposed to these types of writing, and struggled in these courses as a result.

Collier and Morgan (2008) also examined the differences in expectations between non-first-generation and first-generation student expectations. First-generation students struggled more with time management than their non-first-generation peers, and were often frustrated when faculty assumed that certain levels of knowledge (i.e. how to read and comprehend a syllabus, the purpose of office hours, or how to properly structure a research paper) were the norm. The first-generation student interviewed in the study discussed not being aware of how important the syllabus was, or what its purpose was. First-generation students preferred a more detailed syllabus with clear expectations, while non-first-generation students wanted a shorter, less detailed syllabus so that they could locate information more easily. First-generation students also stated that communication with faculty was difficult at times, especially when a professor would use overly academic language and not use language that felt more accessible to them. The first-generation students interviewed as part of the study said that they were less likely to communicate with a professor if they felt as though the professor often taught in a manner that felt as though “they’re going over everyone’s heads” (p. 438). First-generation students also discussed the difficulty they had learning the different styles of each of their professors; one student recounted that a professor instructed the class to write about an experience, so the
students hand wrote a two paper as opposed to typing up the assignment, which was what the professor actually wanted the class to do.

African American students often face culture shock when enrolling in colleges, especially if their hometowns are more diverse than the college they enroll in (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Douglas’ study of ten Black students at a public predominantly white institution (PWI) said that they were very aware of the commonality of voluntary ethnic and racial separation on their campus. Students in the study also discussed no longer feeling connected to their communities at home, and feeling hyperaware of their race on campus. One student stated “I wear my skin color—with a magnifying glass” (p. 422). This sentiment is echoed by a student in Davis et. al’s 2004 study, in which a student described being “the only fly in the buttermilk.”

Winkle-Wagner (2009) examined the difficulties faced by African American women who described a struggle with meeting the expectations of campus and the expectations of home. Through her study, a theme of homelessness and not quite fitting in either place developed. Participants discussed a difficult transition adjusting to the campus environment, and how they often felt alienated from the rest of campus due to their race and gender. The same students reported feeling that college life had changed them, and made it difficult to fit in with their home communities as they had previously been able to. These feelings made them feel additional pressure to succeed academically and assimilate into their college.

Use of CCW to improve academic behaviors

First-generation and Black students’ academic behaviors are shaped by self-efficacy and their ability to adjust to a new environment. Both populations use navigational capital as a way to adjust to their new environment and rely on resistant capital as a way to motivate themselves throughout the college process and once they enroll in college. Both populations rely on resistant
capital as a way to strengthen and develop their academic behaviors by using their experiences as motivation and learning how to navigate an environment that often stereotypes them.

**Navigational capital.** Allen & Solórzano (2001) found that students of color have often found ways to circumvent the race and class based hostility they face in the education system (Alva, 1991; Perry et al., 2003). This is done by relying on their navigational capital. Fordham (1988) found that, in order for African American students to achieve academically, they have to eschew, to an extent, the African American community and instead, assimilate to the culture of their school. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) refer to this phenomenon as “the burden of acting White.” The authors referred to this as a burden because historically Whites would not acknowledge the intelligence of African Americans, and because African Americans would doubt their own academic abilities, thus defining success by comparing their success to the success of White students. Cheatham, Tomlinson, and Ward (1990) offered another viewpoint for successful African American students and concluded that academically successful African Americans have to reject the negative assumptions of their race and create their own racial identity that celebrates their race and empowers them.

**Resistant capital.** Both African American and first-generation students also use resistant capital as a way to exceed other’s expectations of them and overcome stereotypes. African American students and first-generation students can often feel pigeonholed by other’s perceptions of them, which ties directly to the deficit model discussed earlier. Instead of succumbing to expectations, both first-generation and African American students use those stereotypes as motivation to succeed. Black and first-generation students have also used either stereotypes or their family’s struggles as motivation to succeed. African American males who participated in Baber’s 2014 study on transitions from high school to college said that they
constantly found themselves having to overcome stereotypes associated with their race and barriers, which fostered a sense of resiliency within the students who were interviewed. In short, both populations use obstacles and barriers they face as a source of motivation.

First-generation students cited their parents’ struggles and successes as a driving factor in their pursuit of college. Students mentioned that seeing a parent or relative having to work multiple jobs or receive low wages as inspiration to get a college education so that they do not have to do the same (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). First-generation students often use their families as their inspiration to have a better life and succeed in attaining a higher level of education. In his interviews with first-generation students, Gofen (2009) found that participants’ parents were the primary motivator for success, and that participants used their family’s circumstances as a source of motivation to work hard in school. Participants stated that their parents openly discussed the hardships they faced, such as low income, long working hours, not being able to get ahead, and expressing frustration with having missed the opportunity to create a better life for themselves through attending college (Gofen, 2009).

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter examined the traditional measurements of college readiness, as well as two aspects of college readiness: contextual skills and awareness and academic behaviors. It described how first-generation and African American students can use various forms of capital to increase their overall level of college readiness. This chapter also provided a brief overview of the college readiness of first-generation and African American students, and examined other factors that can influence their college readiness through the lens of navigational, aspirational, social, familial and resistant capital.

First-generation and African American students face similar, but not identical, challenges surrounding academic preparation, college knowledge, transitioning to a new environment and
navigating the college process and college as a whole. While both demographics perform poorly as a whole on traditional measurements of readiness, they do have and utilize various traits that enable them to succeed academically. Given that there are first-generation, African American students who excel in and complete college, there must be other ways of determining who is college ready. Since there is little research focusing on students who identify as both African American and first-generation, research on this overlapping demographic of students must be conducted so educators can best address their needs head on and ultimately increase their level of college readiness. By examining the impact that community cultural wealth has on this specific population’s level of college readiness, educators will be able to further create best practices to help first-generation, African American students succeed in college.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

First-generation and Black students are among the least college ready populations in the nation, and their experiences are rarely at the forefront of scholarly discussion regarding college readiness. Through the lens of critical race theory, community cultural wealth enables students from marginalized populations to have their voices heard. In line with that principle, this study utilized a narrative approach that enabled first-generation, African American students to share their experiences and influence future research.

This study sought to answer the following question: how does community cultural wealth impact the level of college readiness of first-generation, African American college students? This chapter will outline qualitative research, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, and the narrative research design. Next, it will provide an overview of participants, procedures, and ethical considerations.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative studies focus on the “how” or “why” of an occurrence. Qualitative research “begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). It also involves methods where observation and experience play a prominent role, such as focus groups or interviews (Shank, 2006). These methods are typically more intimate in nature than the statistical methods used by quantitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2007) state that qualitative research differs from quantitative research in four major ways: its acceptance of postmodern sensibilities, the incorporation of an individual’s point of view, incorporation of the constraints of everyday life, and rich descriptions (pp. 14-16).
In qualitative research, the experience of the individual is the focus of the study, and instead of analyzing participants from the outside, a qualitative researcher works closely with his or her participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Through qualitative analysis, meaning can be constructed from the data collected through interviews or other methods: “The focus of [qualitative] research is generally words, texts and images as opposed to the gathering of statistical data…” (p. 4). Since the ultimate goal of this study is to illustrate the experiences first-generation, African American students face when transitioning from high school to college, a qualitative method was the only way to achieve the intended results.

In recent years, there has been a shift toward a more postmodern form of qualitative research. Postmodernism is a departure from the ideas of modernism, and embraces the idea that knowledge and truth are the result of social, historical, and political discussion and interpretation, from which they are contextual and constructed. (Zeeman, Poggenpoel, Myburgh & Van der Linde, 2002). Within education, there has been an examination of the sources of knowledge—specifically whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted. Examples of scholarly work that have examined sources of knowledge from an “outsider” perspective—the perspective of those who are not traditionally at the forefront of research—include hooks’ critique on the education banking method (1994), Collins’ work on black feminist thought (1986), and Anzaldua’s (1987) work on mestiza knowledges. Patel (2015) extended this research with her discussion on the decolonization of educational research, where she examines how educational research is shaped by colonialism and “its constant pursuit of property and ownership” (p. 357), and calls for a shift from ownership to answerability.
The constructivism-interpretivism paradigm will be used during this study. According to this paradigm, reality is influenced by context, such as one’s experiences and perceptions, as well as by the social environment and the relationship between the researcher and participants. Its focus is to understand experiences. Because of the way that reality is perceived, the researcher must interact with the participants in order to capture the lived experience (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131).

The roots of this paradigm come from the philosophies of Kant. According to Hamilton (1994), Kant’s position was that “human perception derives not only from evidence of the senses but also from the mental apparatus that serves to organize the incoming sense impressions” and that “human claims about nature cannot be independent of inside-the-head processes of the knowing subject (p, 63) (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).” Kant’s work underscores a central idea of constructivist thinking: an objective reality cannot be separated from the participant who is experiencing, processing, and labeling the reality (Sciarra, 1999).

In this paradigm, reality is constructed by the participant (Ponterotto, 2005). In line with constructivist-interpretivist beliefs, this research will focus on telling stories by examining meaning making. This research seeks to determine what meaning is through careful analysis and discussion of experiences (Butin, 2010). Ultimately, this paradigm seeks to illustrate the various realities of individuals by examining their diverse perspectives through examining their experiences, and what they consider to be their personal truths.

Within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the researcher serves as a co-creator while uncovering the experiences of first-generation, African American college students. Since the researcher takes an active role within this paradigm, it will be necessary for the researcher to
“bracket” (Ponterotto, 2005, p.131) or position his or herself “in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from [their] own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25).

**Narrative Research**

This study utilized a narrative research, which is defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as “the study of experience” (p. 189) Narrative research has long served as a form of inquiry, dating back to Aristotle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, narrative became more of an accepted research methodology within the humanities in the 1960s. John Dewey’s educational philosophies played a major role in the development of narrative inquiry; his belief was that experience is a fundamental aspect of learning. These philosophies became the basis for narrative since experiences exist at both the individual and relational context, and can be continuously shaped over time (Creswell, 2009).

Narrative is a popular type of qualitative research in education because it seeks to uncover and convey stories about “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). A narrative form of inquiry is appropriate for this study because it seeks to explore participants’ experiences in relation to their community cultural framework.

**Types of narrative research.** There are several types of narrative research: biographical, autoethnography, life history, personal experience, and oral history. In biographical narrative, the researcher writes someone else’s life story. An autoethnography is recorded and written by the participant in the study, and is defined as “the idea of multiple layers of consciousness, the vulnerable self, the coherent self, critiquing the self in social contexts, the subversion of dominant discourses, and the evocative potential” (Muncey, 2010, as cited in Creswell, 2013).
Life history “portrays an individual’s entire life, while a personal experience story is a narrative study of an individual’s personal experience found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Creswell, 2013). Oral history focuses on “gathering personal reflections of events and their causes and effects from one individual or several individuals (Plummer, 1983, as cited in Creswell, 2013). This study used an oral history narrative approach, as it will collect the participants’ reflections on their preparation, entry, and retention in college.

**Justification of approach.** A narrative inquiry interview study was selected as the methodological approach for this study so that the researcher would be able to gain rich, thick description of the experiences of college students as they transitioned from high school to college. As Clandinin (2006) stated, narrative inquiry retells a story of a person’s experiences and further explains the causes for certain situations. The critical race theory and community cultural wealth lens guided and illuminated the results of the inquiry.

Out of the five approaches of qualitative research discussed by Creswell (2013), a narrative approach was the best fit for this research because it enabled the researcher to explore how the life experiences of the participants impacted them during a specific period of their life. By focusing on life experiences, the researcher was able to examine the life as a whole to determine its impact on their level of college readiness. By comparison, other methods are more narrowly focused and draw meaning from a specific experience (phenomenology), or describing the culture of a group (ethnography), developing a theory from data that is gathered during the research process (grounded theory) or analyzing a case (case study).
Role of Researcher & my Positionality

Prior to engaging in research, it is important for the researcher to discuss his or her positionality in relation to it. This is one of the first steps in identifying one’s possible biases within research. By doing so, researchers uncover their own biases, which enables them to properly isolate them so they do not affect the research process. Within the narrative approach, the relationship between the researcher and participants is of a collaborative nature. Narrative researchers are told stories by participants and are charged with telling those stories through action and dialogue with participants (Creswell, 2013). Thus, identifying my positionality is a key component of this study.

Kincheloe, McLaren, Maher and Tetreault (as cited in Carlton Parsons, 2008) define positionality as “a concept that acknowledges the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender and other socially constructed identifiers in being” (p. 1129). This section will examine my positionality regarding the topic of college readiness, and how I will isolate my personal connections to the topic.

As an African American woman who has worked in the field of college admissions for the last decade at institutions of varying selectivity, I have seen the effects of a lack of college readiness firsthand. I have watched students, primarily students of color, struggle during their first year of college, despite being in the top 10% of their high school graduating class. Some of these students struggle so much that they ultimately drop out of college altogether. I have also seen students who were ranked at the top of their class be denied admission to a selective college due to poor performance on standardized exams and poor writing skills. Overwhelmingly, these students have been African-American and Latino.
The fact that I am an African-American is a bias in that I have never had the vantage point of someone who has never been oppressed. When I am conducting my research, I expect to have some parallel experiences to those shared by the participants. Because of my intersectionality of being both African American and a woman, I have to overcome the stereotypes of being both.

While I acknowledge my positionality, since this particular problem of practice involves the college readiness of African American students, the fact that I am a Black woman may benefit the study. Thus, my positionality could be used in a positive manner. The common ground that I have with participants on the basis of race will put them at ease, and will enable them to feel a level of comfort with me that they may not with others. Briscoe (2005) discusses how similar experiences “forge a sense of unity” amongst individuals (p. 26). This unity can be used to create trust between a researcher and a participant, which is vital as trust is considered one of the tenets of successful qualitative research (Bryman, Stephens & a Campo, 1996). As a college admissions professional, I can draw from my own experiences in the field as a way to illuminate my underlying argument for this study: that a college readiness is more than simply test scores or grade point averages. As someone who was told by teachers that I was not “supposed” to be successful academically, I can relate to some of the obstacles and struggles that first-generation, African American students face.

Site & Participants

The participants in this study were first-generation, African American, traditional aged (18-22 years old) college students. I utilized purposeful sampling as a way to target the specific population needed in order to make the study successful. Creswell (2013) defines purposeful sampling as when the researcher “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the
study (Creswell, 2013, pp. 299-300). This sampling method was best suited for the study as it allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced students’ college readiness through the lens of community cultural wealth.

The research site was a private university in Boston, Williams University (WU). In order to have the viewpoint of students who are far enough in their college career to reflect back on their own levels of college readiness, only sophomores, juniors and seniors were recruited for this study. Since the researcher collected data from a group of participants as a way to tell a collective story in line with a narrative approach (Creswell, 2013; Morse, 1994), ultimately five participants were recruited.

**Recruitment and access**

In order to gather participants, the researcher contacted one of WU’s scholarship offices which houses the Beam program, a program for first-generation students who did not reach their full academic potential during high school due to difficult life circumstances. All students who are selected for Beam must also have high financial need, as evidenced by an estimated family contribution of zero on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Each year, high school counselors nominate over 300 first-generation students who have overcome hardships and persevered despite difficult home lives for this scholarship. Students who are selected for the program receive a full scholarship, which covers tuition, room and board, fees, and study abroad costs. In addition to year around social and academic support, all Beam participants must complete an academically rigorous summer program that prepares students for life at Williams University. In order to apply to the program, students must be nominated by someone who can speak to their resilience. The applications are reviewed by the Beam scholarship committee, and the top 50 candidates are invited to Williams’ campus, along with a support figure, for a day long
interview. During the day, they and their support figure are interviewed by the university’s scholarship office staff and scholarship committee, complete math and English exams, and attend a mock lecture. From the top 50, the Beam class of 10-12 is chosen. Beam provides full scholarships to students, which includes tuition, room and board, books and study abroad, as well as academic support during their time at WU. They also work closely with the program’s advisors throughout their time at the university. Students are also required to complete a summer immersion program prior to matriculation that focuses on academics and getting acclimated to college. Many of the students selected for this program are students of color.

As an additional way to recruit participants, the researcher also contacted the university’s Black cultural center on campus. The cultural center also houses an academic program specifically for high achieving students of color. This invitation only program gives preference to first-generation students. The center also has a listserv that sends out emails to students regarding events and issues related to the Black community, and the researcher intended to use this listserv to serve as an additional method of recruiting students for this study. However, the cultural organization was unable to assist in the recruitment of participants in this study.

The scholarship office staff sent out an email to all students who fit the parameters of the study outlining its purpose. (Appendix A). This email netted four responses out of a pool of 55. One additional participant reached out to the researcher directly after hearing about the study from one of the initial four responders.

**Data Collection & Analysis**

In this study, the researcher was interested in gathering information that delves into the role that community cultural wealth has had in students’ level of college readiness. Through the use of narrative inquiry design, students were allowed to speak and express their opinions and emotions about their educational experiences as they relate to their own college readiness. This
enabled the researcher to hear the full context of the experiences and understand why things occurred. At the outset of each interview, the researcher gained informed consent from each participant (Appendix B).

In this study, the researcher asked semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions as a means to gather data as outlined by Creswell (2009), who advocates using “generally open-ended questions” (p. 181). In addition, the researcher also used “how,” “why,” or hypothetical questions in order to yield affective responses about experiences, perceptions, and values as outlined by Merriam (2009). Their accounts will form “the narrative text of this research approach” (Merriam, 2009, p. 286), which will capture the stories embedded within participants’ narrative of their college experiences. Interviews took place on the university’s campus in a quiet, private room where they were able to continue without interruption. All interviews lasted between 60 to 75 minutes (Appendix C).

Due to the volume of interviews, the researcher utilized a professional transcription service (Rev). Audio recordings were sent to Rev immediately after the interviews were complete. Once completed transcriptions were received, the researcher listened to the audio recordings to check for accuracy, and then sent the transcriptions to the participants for member checking. Since this study utilized a narrative approach, both interviews and the researcher’s field notes were used as data collection tools.

In line with data analysis for a narrative approach, interviews were transcribed verbatim, and both transcription and researcher observation notes were used to code first the initial themes, and then broader themes (Moustakas, 1994) (Appendix D). The researcher analyzed text for the five elements of plot structure as outlined by Yussen and Ozcan (1997): characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolution, as well as using the three dimensional approach suggested by
Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which includes analyzing for the three elements of narrative analysis: interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present and future) and situation. In this approach, data is collected through field notes and interviews, and stories are retold through the narrative elements. Analysis of the narrative approach involves analyzing the data gathered for stories. The researcher then restoried the data and develop themes from the data in chronological order. Restorying refers to the process of reorganizing the stories into a framework (Creswell, 2013).

**Data Storage**

Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality throughout both the data collection and analysis process, and the identity key will be stored separately from the transcript files and audio recordings. All documents related to the study were labeled by pseudonym; names and other identifying markers were erased from any photocopied documents. The professional transcriptionist had no contact with the interview participants and only knew the participants’ pseudonyms. Audiotapes or audio files were destroyed or permanently deleted immediately after being transcribed. Physical artifacts, such as audiotapes, signed consent forms, written interview notes, and evaluation documents, were stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home, and were only be accessible by me. Any electronic files were stored on a password-protected computer.

**Ethical Considerations**

Since this study worked directly with human subjects, it was crucial that all participants have informed consent prior to agreeing to participate in this study. The Belmont Report established three principles that guides the ethical conduct of all research that involves human participants: (1) respect for persons, (2) beneficence, and (3) justice (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2005). Respect for persons refers to respecting each individual by ensuring that individuals who participate in studies are able to participate of their own free will, and are not
coerced into participating. The concept of informed consent is crucial to the research process. Beneficence refers to making sure that the well-being of individuals who participate in research studies is protected. The process of informed consent includes explaining both the potential benefits and risks associated with participating in the study to participants. Three general rules of thumb associated with beneficence are "first, do no harm" (the Hippocratic Oath), maximize benefits and minimize risks. Justice refers to treating all participants equally throughout the course of the study (Marczyk et al., 2005).

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research is often criticized for its failure to utilize traditional validation or verification methods because of its subjective nature. However, there are several validation strategies that can be used to assess the accuracy of qualitative researcher’s findings and to ensure that the studies are credible and rigorous (Creswell, 2013). This study will use member checking, rich, thick description, and clarification of researcher bias.

As this study relied largely on participant interviews, the researcher utilized member checking so that participants could “judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). After an interview was transcribed, the participant was given the opportunity to read the transcript and make clarifications (Appendix E); this practice is known as member checking. These notes of clarification were attached to the transcript and referenced during analysis. The use of rich, thick description allows the reader to determine transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 2013) because the writer uses detail to describe the participants and research setting. Clarifying researcher bias is crucial to any qualitative study because it enables the reader to understand my position, potential biases and assumptions (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 2013).
Chapter Summary

This research study utilized a qualitative, narrative oral history approach to examine the impact of community cultural wealth on first-generation, African American students’ college readiness. This approach enabled the researcher to serve as a co-creator with the participants and uncover how their life experiences shaped their college readiness. This study followed the data collection and analysis procedures of narrative research by transcribing interviews verbatim and coding for initial, then broader themes. The researcher used member checking, rich, thick description and clarification of researcher bias to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.
CHAPTER FOUR: NARRATIVES AND THEMES

The purpose of this research study was to examine the experiences of first-generation, African American students during their transition from high school to college. Through the participants’ self-reflections on their own level of college readiness, it sought to answer the question “What role does community cultural wealth play in impacting African American, first-generation students’ level of college readiness?” The theoretical framework used during this study is community cultural wealth, a critical race theory based response to the concept of cultural capital. Community cultural wealth reframes conversation toward a focus on the knowledge and skills that students of color bring to the classroom instead of what they do not. This study utilized a narrative methodology in order to place the experiences of the participants at the forefront.

Participants

The five participants in this study all faced various obstacles while transitioning from high school to college. What follows are the stories of Jessica, Kendra, Mark, Linda and Cassandra, five first-generation, self-identified African American college students at Williams University, a large research university in Boston.

Jessica

Jessica was a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in finance who identified as Afro-Latina. She was born and raised in Boston, and lived with her mother and two siblings, an older brother and a younger sister while growing up; her father was in and out of her life. Jessica’s mother immigrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic.

High school. Jessica attended a private school in Boston on full scholarship, where she enrolled in rigorous courses, including honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Her mother did not want her attend public school because she thought her daughter could get a better
education at a private school. During her sophomore year, her family was briefly homeless after being evicted from their apartment. In high school, Jessica became involved in the Mayor’s Youth Council, a team of teenagers from the city who advised the Mayor on policies and programming for teens. Through her work on the Youth Council, Jessica became aware of the college preparatory resources offered by the city, and signed herself up for them. One of the resources she signed up for was Let’s Get Ready, an organization that provides SAT preparation and admissions counseling to low-income students as they navigate the college admissions process. She credited this organization, in part, with helping her prepare to enroll in college.

**Reflections on college readiness and first year in college.** Jessica enrolled at WU in the Fall of 2016 and was a member of the Beam program. As part of the college application process, Jessica took the SAT twice and the ACT once. Jessica credits the rigor of the summer program with helping her make Dean’s List during her first semester at WU: “Fall semester was a breeze because of the intense summer training course, but I don't know if I would be prepared enough for college if I didn't have that.” During her first year, she struggled to find a place where she could be herself, and also balanced both her family and student responsibilities, although that initially was not easy. Attending a diverse, predominantly white institution was difficult for her at first:

I think because many of the international students don't identify as Black, so [it was difficult] to be the only person who'll be like, “okay I'm Black.” We're talking about racism and to be a person of color and say I'm Black and then sit next to this person from Dubai and they don't really understand the racial tensions of the U.S. Then there’s a white professor teaching. That's been kind of hard and awkward situation for me to deal with.

**Kendra**

Kendra was a 19-year-old sophomore from Providence, RI majoring in International Business. Also a member of the Beam program, she was raised primarily by her mother and her
stepfather. While she has a larger extended family of half siblings, she was raised as an only child. Her parents immigrated to the United States from Liberia in the 1990s.

**High school.** Kendra attended an exam school in Providence. An exam school is a selective public school where acceptance into the school is based on grades and the results of an entrance exam. While enrolled in high school, she completed a rigorous curriculum. She began taking AP courses during her sophomore year, and took only AP courses during her junior and senior year. Reflecting back on her high school experience, she struggled with what she viewed as the social inequity of exam school:

> I definitely think exam schools were meant to segregate. To me, that's what it seems. In Boston, you have to pay to take the exams, so if you don't have that money, you are not going to those schools.

While her school was a reflection of the racial population of Providence, Kendra still saw students of color, primarily Latino and African American treated unfairly:

> The way they were being treated, like who would get in trouble more, who got suspended more, who would get left out at school, or even the hierarchy to the classes, like who [was allowed to take] AP's, how they were graded, or who got picked on more. So even though the academics were great, I don't think there was enough advocacy [for all students].

During high school, Kendra was involved in an arts program called New Urban Arts that provided her with a mentor, as well as free resources to use during the college application process.

**Reflections on college readiness and first year in college.** Kendra took the both the SAT and the ACT twice; the cost of the exams were covered by New Urban Arts. In addition, she also used free copies of test prep books provided by the program to prepare for the exams. She had mixed feelings about her performance on the standardized tests:

> After I took the exam, I didn't feel great, because I was like, “Wow, this is the number that kind of dictates my future.” But when I found out, compared to my friends or just
other people I talked to, it was really good. Then I would research it, and ... the worst website to go to in high school is college confidential [a website where students try to compare themselves to other college applicants and determine based on previous admissions data who has the best chance of being admitted into an institution]. The worst [emphasis added]. Everybody's, "Um, can somebody match me? I have a 2100, and I'm trying to get into whatever school." So I most definitely didn't feel great after the exams.

Kendra was also admitted to WU through the Beam program; her mentors at New Urban Arts served as her nominators. She specifically applied to colleges and universities that had programs for first-generation students:

I chose Beam, not only because I knew other people who are in the program, but also because it was geared towards me...Even though I felt like, in comparison to my peers I was okay [academically], I'm going to school with kids who went to private school, who had these resources I didn't have...That's one of the reasons why I chose WU, because I was, "Okay, if I'm going to be with a group of people who, basically, come from the same background as me and can relate to the issues that I had," because I think they're very unique problems. Then I started my first year, and because of the summer immersion program, I was scared because I didn't know what to expect from college but summer immersion really gave me the skillset to do well, and it gave me the confidence to know that if I just study hard, I could be in the same caliber as these other people.”

During her first year in college, Kendra performed well academically, but struggled to find her place in a new environment:

I just thought I wasn't going to do well in college period. I ended up doing well [academically]...I think everything else is still hard, like friends, all of that was harder because I'm from a small city. So I think everything else was more difficult.

During her first year, she joined two organizations—one offered through her college, as well as one of the Black student organizations on campus.

Mark

Mark was a 21-year-old senior from New York City majoring in Management Information Systems & Marketing. Also a member of Beam, he grew up with his mom and his older brother.
**High school.** Mark attended a performing arts high school in Brooklyn, where he ultimately graduated as valedictorian. In hindsight, Mark said there was a not a college going culture at his high school, in part because their AP curriculum only included calculus and English, and calculus was not offered during his senior year, despite being offered previously:

Me and my brother went to the same high school. They offered it [AP Calculus] through his year, but when we tried to get it they just said no. The AP English program was pretty good. They tried to help us a lot with that, but besides the AP programs I feel like they didn't really offer us stuff to get us ready for college.

At the end of middle school, Mark joined Jeter’s Leaders, a program through Derek Jeter’s Turn 2 Foundation, which focuses on teaching kids to abstain from drugs and alcohol and make positive life choices instead. Students apply to join the program when they are in eighth grade and remain in the program until high school graduation. Acceptance into the program is competitive—Jeter’s Leaders only accepts 8-10 students each year. Each Saturday, participants attend workshops about various topics such as eating healthy, leadership development, and college readiness. Another component of the program was taking the students on college tours during spring break and providing SAT preparation. It was through a college tour with Jeter’s Leaders that Mark became familiar with Beam and WU; the program coordinator of Jeter’s Leaders was an alumna of Beam. After hearing about her experiences at WU, Mark asked her to nominate him for the program.

**Reflections on college readiness and first year in college.** Mark prepared for the SAT through test preparation provided by Jeter’s Leaders, as well as studying with his classmates on his own. The second time took the exam, he scored a 1500 out of 2400:

I definitely didn't do as well as I wanted to. The test prep definitely helped. I feel like I would have got even lower if I wouldn't have the test prep through Jeter's Leaders, but I think it was definitely nerve wracking taking that test because I knew how much college is dependent on it.
Regarding his actual score, Mark said, “I don't think it says anything about how ready I was for school. I just didn't do well, but I don't think that says that I wasn't ready for college.”

Mark faced challenges during summer immersion, as well in the classroom, both of which will be discussed in depth later in this chapter. However, Mark remains grateful for his involvement in Beam, especially the fact that Beam placed less emphasis on test scores compared to regular admission into the university:

I can't thank Beam enough because they don't look at that stuff. If I was to apply and try to get in regularly, the average to get in here is 1700 and above. They don't look at that, they're just looking at your drive and to see if you have that support figure without looking at those things. It was definitely nerve wracking taking that test, but again, luckily I'm still here because they don't look at stuff like that.

Linda

Linda was a 23-year-old Beam senior majoring in Human Services and American Sign Language who was raised by her mother in Boston. She attended a technical high school in the city. Her mother passed away when Linda was 17, and she moved in with family until she enrolled at WU.

High school. Linda enrolled at her high school at her mother’s urging; her mother believed that if Linda didn’t enroll in college after high school, at least she would have the knowledge of a trade to help her begin a career. Linda ultimately ended up in the medical assisting track, where she completed courses and local internships that related to her high school concentration. Linda was also an athlete, playing volleyball, basketball, and softball. Since her mother was strict, sports were Linda’s only social outlet.

Reflecting back on her high school curriculum, she noted that it wasn’t a college preparatory school: “I don't think everyone there realized that, hey, you're here in case you don't make it [into college].” However, Linda believed teachers at her high school seemed to channel
much of their energy toward students who were academically successful, and Linda was part of that group. That academic discipline stemmed from her mother’s strictness; since she was only allowed to go to school and participate in sports: that routine, “…really did help me academically and professionally, because [now] I have a strong work ethic. I have to do everything before I even think about laying down. It's kind of like what drives me, it's how I am,” Linda said. Upon graduation, she had a 4.1 grade point average, and was in the top five of her graduating class.

**Reflections on college readiness and first year in college.** Linda also enrolled at WU as a Beam scholar. Despite her strong academic performance in high school, once she arrived at WU she realized that her academic preparation was not on par with that of her peers. To her, this put her at a disadvantage when she enrolled in college: “I think it's [the school district] that failed me. Investing in other high schools [in Boston] that are the cream of the crop, not really looking out for weaker performing schools because, they're already messing up…”

Linda grew up in an era when compulsory testing was a major component of education in Massachusetts; she took her first standardized exam in elementary school. By the time she took the SATs, she was used to the testing environment. She also knew what was at stake: “At this point I felt like I was on my own, my mom [had] passed away, [so] college was like, "I need to get there, that's the only way to change my life.”” Through her involvement with a community-based organization, Minds Matter, she was able to prepare to take the SAT with their financial assistance. She scored in the 1400s out of 2400 on the SAT. When asked if she believed that score was an accurate depiction of her academic abilities, she said:

Before I got to WU, I want to say yeah, I thought I was one of the smartest people in the world, ’cause I was also told that a lot by staff in high school, guidance counselors and coaches. I needed that support; it helped me to believe in myself. So, I never thought [my high school] was a bad school, but even, looking back at it now, it's like, I definitely see flaws in the district and how we can get better.
She said she often reflects on how her stellar grades in high school did not transfer into college, in part because of the inequity between the education she received and that of her college peers.

I think that if I didn't have the summer immersion program, if that wasn't a core part of the Beam program, I probably would have done horribly my freshman year because whatever my high school gave me [academically], and whatever WU gave me, those are two different things. Whereas the summer immersion program truly prepped me because it was harder than what WU gave me. I feel like I didn't reach the level of summer immersion work until maybe my junior year here, because they made the classes that much harder. My GPA's been a solid 2.5, and I always feel like I can do better, especially for someone who's like, been at a constant 3.8 and graduated with a 4.1 [in high school]. It could just be me beating up myself on it, but also I recognize that again, Boston is not the greatest of school districts, and I go to a private school where I wasn't really prepared [during high school]. It’s like, although I was pushed into college prep programs and stuff, the classes that were available to me [AP classes], I don't feel like it helps, 'cause then I would talk to other kids…and things I was learning in 9th and 10th grade, they learned in 6th and 7th grade. So I can definitely see the gap there. I've always known that gap, like, why is it this way at my school, what is the difference? Why are they learning different things faster than I am? Even learning that in high school I realized that I was set back a little, and in college I realized how even much bigger that gap is now.

Cassandra

Cassandra was a 22-year-old senior from Brockton, MA, who was majoring in biology. She was also a first-generation Haitian American. Growing up, she lived with her parents and her older brother. Her older brother graduated from Brighton College, another selective institution in Boston.

High school. Cassandra’s high school offered a vast academic curriculum, including a business, technology and career option. Cassandra’s brother was two years older than her, and she described him as the “Big Man on Campus,” who was well-liked by everyone. Since her brother was so well known, teachers favored her. Because she always loved science, she enrolled in the nursing program, where she could prepare to eventually take the certified nursing assistant (CNA) exam.
Reflecting back on her high school experience, Cassandra believed that students either perform really well academically or really poorly, due in part to the violence in the city, as well as the fact that students’ parents often work multiple jobs just to support their families:

I was glad to be a favorite of most teachers. But like seeing other kids who teachers clearly talk down to. They tell them “What are you doing? You're not doing what you're supposed to be doing,” or tell them that they're not good enough or things like that. I'm glad that never happened to me but having to see that, it's no wonder [not everyone does well].

**Reflections on college readiness and first year in college.** Unlike the rest of the participants in this study, Cassandra was not a member of the Beam. Once she got to WU, she quickly felt overwhelmed. She said the transition itself was “rough:”

I had at least one breakdown my freshman year. I was like this was not what I prepared for. It was a lot harder. Yeah, what are all these exams to study for? This was not part of my schooling. I wasn't prepared for it at all. I was just not ready to go to college at all. They didn't tell us that they don't give you homework. You know, it's not assigned, it's required. You still have to do it. They didn't tell us "Oh, well you're gonna have a roommate you may not like." They didn't tell us that. They didn't tell us that it's hard to keep friends the first year of college. They didn't tell all these little things. It was like "Wow, I'm really going in here blind."

Cassandra took the SAT twice, ultimately scoring an 1800 out of 2400. She prepared with the help of her brother, who had taken the exam previously, as well as through a test prep book.

While she scored higher than many of her friends, she remembers thinking it wasn’t the most accurate measures of a student’s ability:

It didn't take into account all the activities I was doing. It didn't take into account the cultural effect that my own culture has on me. It didn't take into account the teachers that would have the effect that they had on me. It really wasn't the best measure of student achievement...I remember this one moment though, this Black kid that barely did well in classes got a 2300. I'm just like that's not a good measure. This kid is getting like D’s and F’s, gets like 2300. I don't believe this, but wow, I'm really busting my butt in all these classes and this kid's barely squeezing by and he gets a 2300.
Themes

The following themes emerged from this study: Sources of support (community-based organizations and college prep programs, significant adult figures, and Beam), Sources of motivation (family, intrinsic motivation, and cost/value of an education), and Tensions adjusting to college (academic difficulties, not feeling supported, shifting relationships/responsibilities.)

Sources of Support

All participants found support from various sources. The sources included the community-based organizations and college prep programs they were involved in, significant adult figures, including siblings, teachers, school counselors and others, and the Beam program. (See Appendix F). All of these sources provided the participants with guidance and resources during their transition from high school to college.

Community-based organizations and college prep programs. All participants relied on their community in some way to help them transition from high school to college. Jessica participated in Let’s Get Ready, Kendra in New Urban Arts, Mark in Jeter’s Leaders, Linda in Minds Matter, and Cassandra in her church.

When asked how she got involved with Let’s Get Ready, Jessica said, “I’ve always been a person with a plan.” Again, through her work with the city of Boston, she became more aware of the resources for youth in the city:

I got involved in the Mayor's office and I joined the Mayor's youth council and became an advocate for members of my community. I found out about all these different things, all these different programs and I was like, I'm signing myself up, I'm signing myself up.

Kendra relied on the free college application resources, including SAT test preparation, through her involvement with New Urban Arts, as well as mentors. “I found my best friends there, developed so many close relationships with the mentors that I'm still in contact with to this day. It's was life-changing to me,” Kendra said.
Mark’s involvement in Jeter’s Leader provided him with both structure and college resources. In addition to participating in the Saturday workshops, there were several requirements that Mark had to meet to participate in Jeter’s Leaders:

- You had to volunteer, and you also had to keep a minimum GPA requirement.
- Throughout the week they might have some activities they might need you to go to, which could be anything from getting together through community service as a group, or doing another activity with the program.

It was through the influence of this program and the guidance of his English teacher that Mark became even more focused on going to college:

- Through all those resources like the Jeter's program and my English teacher [Ms. Smith], they stressed the value of college and what it could do, so that stuck to me and I was like “Okay, I do want to do something with my life.

Linda joined Minds Matter during her sophomore year of high school, and relied heavily on both their test prep services, as well as the summer college course option to ease her transition to college: “Taking classes at Harvard through Minds Matter also helped too, because now I know what it's like to be in a college campus, how to be in a college class for three hours.”

Cassandra’s church also served as a source of support, with members of her church cooking dinners for her so that she could keep them in her refrigerator on campus or give her rides to and from campus if she needed one:

- I think having the support of the whole church, me and my brother were put on a golden pedestal as the poster children for students getting to college, that definitely helped. People would be proud of the fact I got into college.

**Significant adult figures.** All participants had several key figures in their life who supported them at various stages throughout their transition from high school to college by either guiding them through the college admissions process or serving as a source of motivation. These support figures included siblings, teachers, school counselors, and, in one case, a best friend’s mother.
**Siblings.** Both Mark and Cassandra found support from their older brothers, who they both attended high school with. Cassandra’s brother was two years older, while Mark’s was one year older. In addition to his mother, Mark credited his brother with setting an example for him to follow and providing advice on the college process:

My brother’s older, so luckily I could see him go through it and try to figure stuff out, so that I can learn from him and not do it all by myself. We always encourage each other. I definitely looked up to him, and still do look up to him, so definitely having him go through it first really helped for sure, because I could just ask him questions and then again I had other resources as well to help me. My family has always been supportive, and were supportive during whatever colleges I was applying to, what kind of aid they had available, and trying to figure out the pros and cons for each school.

Cassandra also looked to her brother for advice in high school, as well as once she prepared to go through the college admissions process:

My brother role modeled for me. He was very active in school. He was in theater. He was in multiple sports. He was an announcer for school announcements in the morning. He and the principal were like best friends, basically. There was no one at school that could say they hated my brother.

With a brother who was so well liked, that sometimes came with expectations:

So people would have all these things for me to do. It's almost funny about all those expectations, but it helped me to know that everybody would help me out with choosing classes. "Oh, don't get this teacher," or talk to teachers beforehand, or little things like that, seeing what kind of clubs I was in. It was just really nice to have my big brother around.

Since her brother also attended college in Boston, she was able to lean on him for support that she felt WU was lacking. He, along with her classmate, Virginia, taught her how be comfortable navigating the city’s subway system:

Asking him "Oh, how do you get from here to here? What is the T? Please inform me." Having him teach me those things. I think also, my friend that I did have back then, a White girl from Jersey who became my best friend in college [Virginia], [but] she had to transfer [out of the university]. She was so supportive, so having for a buddy system kind of thing to go to Boston. That's really it though. My brother and Virginia. I like having my brother because he's been through the whole thing. Having him to tell me what to do
and having that kind of support definitely helped in the ways that the university kind of lacked.

Before she graduated from high school, Cassandra was able to experience college life by visiting her brother in college in Boston:

I think definitely watching my brother succeed and having him show me that it can be possible to leave Brockton and then not have to come back. I think definitely him inviting me over to his dorms for like a weekend type college experience prepared me for that.

**Teachers.** Two participants relied on the advice and guidance of their teachers. Kendra’s kindergarten teacher mapped out an academic plan for her from grade school through college to ensure she was prepared for college:

My mom said that she let my kindergarten teacher basically mapped out my academic career for me, so I'd go to this school, and this high school, and that's what my mom followed religiously ... my mom wouldn't have known [otherwise].

Mark’s English teacher, Ms. Smith, played such an important role in his life that he chose her to be his support figure during Beam’s interview day. Ms. Smith taught him English during his sophomore year, but they stayed in touch:

She just always kept in contact with me, even after I took her class to check in into how we're all doing, what colleges have you applied to, and she would review our essays as well. She always pushed college to us when we were in high school. She would always bring back brochures and help us get ready, and she really cared about our personal well-being and making sure we went to college as well…

Since his high school did not promote a college going culture, students were often forced to rely on other forms of support when preparing for college. It fell to teachers to encourage their students to consider a college education, which is what Mark’s English teacher tried to do:

That would be up to the individual teachers, who care about the students to help them or give them resources. Because Ms. Smith knew us well, so she would say "This is a scholarship that I think would work for you."
**School Counselors.** School counselors at the high school level played a significant role in all of the participants’ high school careers, albeit in different ways. When Jessica was accepted into WU, she felt as though the school wanted to take credit for her success without helping her get there. In particular, Jessica felt as though her guidance counselor underestimated her abilities:

She was like you need to apply to all these state schools and I don't know, schools that I personally didn't think I deserved to be in. I was like, I'm only applying to UMass Amherst as my safety. This is my only safety and she was like, no this is my only safety because I worked so hard throughout high school that I didn't want to end up at UMass Boston or UMass Dartmouth. Not that those are bad schools but I feel like she was underestimating my abilities. Then when I did get into a great school and I got in with a scholarship, they kind of acted just like this is a product of our work where it was like, you guys weren’t really helpful or believing in me from the beginning.

She continued:

They definitely tried to take credit, which I don't even know why because they didn't help me at all in my college process. My guidance counselor, I would try to schedule a meeting with her. She would say “I'm fully booked.” My friends would try to schedule and meeting with her and she would say, “yeah come in, I have office hours.” I'd be like, “I just want to talk to you about this” and she's like, “yeah well I'm kind of busy.” I don't know if she didn't like me but she just didn't ... I feel like she wasn't putting in the effort that I deserved compared to other students. Maybe she was overwhelmed but we were a small school so I don't know. I felt like I wished they kind of believed in me a little more. Given that I wasn't a bad student. I graduated top of my class, in National Honors Society. I feel like she just didn't give me the time of day.

Kendra voiced similar concerns about her own counselor:

So, I think once my accomplishments came, and it was, "oh she got into this school, or this program.” It got to the guidance counselor, they clapped and they congratulated the accomplishment, but they weren't there during the supplements and things, so it would have been, my art program, that's where I got all of that [support] from. I think everyone was, "oh we're rooting for you," but [during the college application process] we did everything. We had to get them our recommendations—even the counselor recommendation—we had to give them a list of what we did and our resume and then they would ... granted it was a 300+ graduating class, and so I guess, but we had to basically tell them, "here is the framework, and you write that.”

Mark’s high school only had one counselor for the entire school—roughly 300 students—which resulted in difficulty trying to get guidance on how to navigate the college process:
I always felt like if you try to go through her you have to book a meeting, but you would never be able to go. It would be up to the individual teachers to really care and go out of their way to help you, but there weren't any programs set up to help us succeed in a way. It was only one counselor in the high school. That's probably why she didn't have time for all of us, but at the same time only the seniors really need her. I wish they would have done workshops...I wish the high school, if it would have came from the top down, "You got to go to college, you got to go to college, you got to go to college. This is important." I wish they would have stressed that more and given more resources such as my English teacher did, but here there's scholarships you can apply to. Another thing is like as I mentioned with my friends is like you get into college, and you don't have the aid, so I wish they would have told us more about scholarships, more about colleges and how to be ready for school and things like that. They just didn't have any workshops like that.

Cassandra didn’t receive any guidance from her high school regarding the best courses to take to prepare for college:

They didn't tell me that AP and IB [International Baccalaureate) students got college course credit, which would have probably been nice to know for a head start. It's like [mimicking the voice of a counselor] “you're Black, oh you want to take IB [International Baccalaureate] courses. Are you sure you want to do that? You're not prepared for that." I remember I tried to take IB English. I was doing really well in my English classes and then the guidance counselor was like "You know they have Honors instead, you don't have to go straight into IB you know. You could go on in right now, but I think you should just wait a little bit." It was like "Wow, you're really gonna tell me I can't do a class because I'm Black, is that what you're trying to say? I'll stay back then." And they did that because I was Black. I was just like “Maybe I'm not as smart as I think I was.”

Linda was the only participant who discussed having a positive relationship with her school counselor. He was the first person to tell her about the Beam program, and served as her nominator for consideration into the program:

I wouldn’t even be here at WU if my guidance counselor didn’t tell me to come to the Beam Scholar interview day...The only reason I'm here [at WU] is because of my guidance counselor. That one man, he took on 20, 30 kids, and made it work. It was all him.

*Others.* During high school, Jessica also relied heavily on the guidance provided by a friend’s mother her freshman year who took interest in making sure that Jessica had the support necessary:
She always kept on top of me. My mom never kept on top of my grades, never. She would always check my grades and she had access to my transcripts, my medical files, everything. My financial aid in school, if something was wrong with my scholarship and we needed to write a letter or something I could talk to her about it. She would be like, okay we got this. This was a white woman too. She kind of stuck through it throughout the whole way and even when I went for a Beam interview, she came as my support figure and we still keep in touch now but she knows I have Beam and I don't need someone to advocate for me as much. She kind of did it all, she didn't do it all but she kind of held my hand along the way. Versus my mom didn't know, so she couldn't do it. She didn't really understand but my mom was definitely grateful that she was there. I never asked her for help, I don't know if it was altruism, I don't know what was happening but she just did it and I was just like, okay and I just went along with it.…

Basically she was like, we're going to do the Beam program, you're going to get in, I don't care what you say. She kind of just had the 'you're going to get in' mentality and then we went through all the different schools I wanted to apply to and she kind of helped me along my way.

Kendra’s significant adult figure was a mentor she found through her involvement in New Urban Arts:

I met my mentor during a social justice inquiry I did during the summer, like a paid internship there. She ended up becoming not only my mentor, but my friend, she was with me throughout the whole thing. And she went to Brown, and she was also first-generation, so she was also pushing for me to go to Brown. And seeing that, and having that inspiration, really inspired me. She pressed me to do my supplements, she said, "do that and apply to there.

Linda was influenced by two sets of mentors who helped her during her time with Minds Matter:

They [her first set of mentors] nominated me, they really made it work for me, they helped me revise my personal statement, 'cause I didn't want my personal statement to be sad or anything, but I still wanted them to know a less sad version. More resilient, confident, I'm ready to take it on, kind of thing. So I asked them to nominate me, and then the program kind of ended right after that, so I ended up calling them on the bus on the way home, after everything's calmed down, like, "Hey, I've made it [into Beam]." And it's like, [impersonating the voice of her mentor] "Oh my god, I'm so happy."

**Beam.** The four participants who were Beam scholars—Jessica, Kendra, Mark, and Linda—all credit their successes at Williams University due to the support provided by the program. Jessica said that the summer bridge component of the program was so intense that it
made her first semester of her first year “a breeze”—she made Dean’s List her first semester. Calling the program her “home away from home,” Jessica explained why the program was so helpful: “You come in with friends and you come in with a network of people so if you have questions…you can go to them.” Kendra said, “If I removed Beam and just put myself in the school, I don't know what I would have relied on...I think I would have been probably even more lost.” All Beam participants also underscored how crucial the advice and guidance of their scholarship advisor, Mr. Avery, was. Mark said:

It would have been so tough, especially going through that computer science program. I mentioned how we go in to Mr. Avery twice a week to figure that out. I think it would have been a little harder. Honestly, when I need help, when I need anything career and academic wise I'll just go to Mr. Avery. I don't really go to my school's academic advisor… Yeah, I have my official academic advisor, but I talked to him maybe once, so it's just different because my official academic advisor has so many kids, while Mr. Avery only has like 50 kids.

Linda referred to the scholarship support staff as “my rock, they're my stability, they're my support.” Living as a group during the summer bridge program, and being part of a cohort made the students bond and become like a family. Mark, who has been roommates with two of his Beam classmates since freshman year, said, “We’ve all have stayed really close, because we saw each other cry, sad. You go through it together so you stay close.” Linda echoed that the closeness of the cohorts helped everyone understand each other better:

So it's like whenever one us just flips out for no reason 'cause we're mad, it's like, okay, I know why, I'll go talk to them later. We're really kind of like a family-ish kind of thing. I refer to a lot of them as my brothers and sisters. Or like my best friends, because we're just so close. We really do treat each other like siblings.

Summary. All participants relied on community-based organizations, as well as significant adult figures, and the Beam program for support. The participants were able to use the guidance and guidance and advice they received from their college prep programs, mentors,
teachers, counselors, siblings, other adults, and the Beam program to navigate the college admissions process and make a successful transition from high school to college. In some cases, these sources of support also served as sources of motivation.

**Sources of Motivation**

All participants had various sources of motivation, ranging from wanting to make their families proud to wanting a better life. The cost of an education—and wanting to make the most of an opportunity—also served as a motivator to perform well academically for many of the participants. This section will discuss the impact of family, intrinsic motivation, and the cost of an education as sources of motivation.

**Family.** All participants relied on their families as a means of motivation. Jessica’s primary motivator was her mother:

"My mother was always telling me I need to be better and I need to do better. She's made a lot of sacrifices in life. Her journey to this country was really hard and it was kind of my job to be her American dream and so she told me that since I was five and I was always reminded you need to be the best, you need to be good. It was kind of ingrained in me. You just need to perform. If you weren't performing you were letting me down. In some ways even now when I think about it I feel like I was not necessarily letting her down but I was letting the whole population of immigrants down."

Kendra also drew inspiration from her mother. When asked what motivated her to succeed, Kendra said:

"I still appreciate what she said. …You just realize, as a person who just relocated from a different country and just had to restart. It’s an insane feat to overcome. Definitely my mother, even with the annoying, "you need to do this, and get good grades," and all of that, and "Oh yeah, I do want to get good grades for you," … My mom definitely inspired me."

Regarding her parents, Kendra said: “They're also my motivators, they're always encouraging me to do well. I still want to do well for them and show them, and go buy them a house.”
While Mark drew inspiration from several individuals, his primary source of motivation was his mother: “She always stressed college on us [he and his brother], so not only was it the Jeter’s Leaders program as well, but it was just knowing that we had to go to college…

Mark’s brother also served as a source of motivation during high school:

Because my brother went to the same high school as me, I always looked up to him as motivation and things that he did. I was trying to match him at least. Again, coming from just going to college and coming from the same home, I knew that’s what his goal was, so in high school I just always asked him for advice. He graduated valedictorian. I also graduated valedictorian, again trying to follow his steps.

The death of Linda’s mother during her junior year of high school motivated her—and forced her to grow up:

I think what made it [the transition from high school to college] easy was my mom just passing away and dealing with that, and basically forcing myself to be an adult before anyone else my age really knew what that was. Even now that is something I still face. That definitely opened my eyes…like, I have to do this, whatever they throw at me, I have to be able to handle it.

The pride of Cassandra’s parents in her and her brother’s achievements were also a driving factor:

My parents would get so excited and bragging about us to every person they ever met. My dad would tell the people that ride in his cab "Oh my daughter is at WU, it's so good, so special…Having my parents be so excited for me to go to college and having younger people in church be so proud of me and so in awe of a person from Brockton going to WU or Brighton College. Definitely being a role model for younger kids like that, that really pushes me to succeed more.

Intrinsic motivation. Various situations faced by the participants provided them with intrinsic motivation, ranging from being first-generation Americans to access to a better life.

The fact that her mother moved to the United States to create a better life for herself and her family was always something that stuck with Jessica:

I always feel like this constant pressure just to be the best student I can be. I always tell myself my mother's trip to this country wasn’t in vain. I've had that constant pressure to do well and perform well has always been really present since I was younger…
Jessica also found motivation in being one of the few people of color in her business classes:

Since I'm at a PWI, every time I'm in a room with a professor or the majority of students...I'm a finance major so all my classes consist of mainly White males and so I always feel like I need to be twice as prepared as the person next to me and God forbid I raise my hand and answer the question and say the wrong answer because that kills me inside. Great, I'm the only female Black person and I answered it wrong and now all these people think I'm stupid, I let everyone down. I always feel like I need to be twice as prepared as anyone in the room. That's kind of my motivation.

In addition to her parents, Kendra had her own internal motivation to do better. To Kendra, doing well academically was the key to a better life:

But I think, again, to me, I think it's the same thing in high school where everyone just still had that assumption that, "oh she's smart, she's going to do it," so you just want to not drop the ball. In high school, it was, "you need to do all of this, and do those extracurriculars, and do all of this and get into a great college, because that's what your life is for," and the crazy thing is, doing all of this again, to get into a great Master's program, or a great job, and that's your life... you have to legit work twice as hard [to do well academically]. I think sometimes you've just got to do it, because you've got to do what you've got to do.

Linda also discussed wanting to have more than what she grew up with as a source of motivation:

I want to definitely be better than my mom, because I feel like every parent wants their kids to be better than them. So, I'm kind of thinking not too much of what would my mom want me to do, but understand that I did grow up the way I grew up, I grew up poor and didn't know I was poor. So, I thought food stamps was a thing, everyone got it, everyone was supposed to get it, because that's what I was surrounded with. I didn't know anything about the middle class. I knew nothing about that. I didn't even think it was real. That's really my motivation, to understand where I come from, and not as in run far away from it or get out of it, but just make it. Make it so like I still know where I come from, I still want to get back to my community, but I still want to live somewhere in a quiet house in the suburbs... I just want to get to where I want to be, get these degrees...I just want a house and a car, that's all I want.

In addition to his mother, brother, and Ms. Smith, Mark found his own internal motivation after Beam program staff allowed him to retake a required course he initially failed during summer immersion:
I still got a second chance, and that really was the ultimate motivation for me, is like "You're not even supposed to be here, so you got to work really hard to prove yourself," so every semester besides freshman year I've been on the Dean's List [3.5 GPA requirement]. I just want to prove that I do deserve to be here, and it was just ... The [difference in the] level of work going from high school to even summer immersion was so ridiculous. I struggled so much, and I didn't end up passing that class then. Every semester I'm like "I have to prove that." Even though I'm a fourth year, I still remember. I got a second chance, so I can't mess that up.

In addition to serving as a vital source of support, Cassandra also found motivation from her brother: “It was great to see my brother and see what's possible for a Black person that actually tried really hard.”

Cost and value of education. Most of the participants expressed concern about the high cost of an education and trying to lessen the burden of those costs on their parents, albeit in different ways. The cost of an education—and the knowledge that completing a college degree would have a positive impact on their life—served as motivation to do well. When Jessica spoke of taking the SAT and ACTs she said:

For me, it was really hard when I was taking those two exams because they were super expensive. Every time I took the exam it was just kind of like ‘oh I need to do well because this exam is expensive and I can't afford to pay for it and do it again.’ I felt like my whole career rested on these two exams.

A major part of the appeal of being a Beam student is that is a full scholarship, which includes, tuition, room and board, fees, books and study abroad, so there is no out of pocket cost for students or their families. Both Kendra and Linda said that the full scholarship that came from the Beam program made choosing Williams University an easy choice. Kendra said that she did not want to be a financial burden to her parents. Mark made similar comments, stating that the full scholarship “took the pressure off.”
On the other hand, Cassandra, who did not receive a full scholarship, wished she had been more aware of the various scholarships offered for Black students at WU, both for the financial assistance and the academic support that is available to recipients of those scholarships:

“I also didn’t know that the University offers scholarships for Black students. That was never brought to my attention. So it was like, I paid all this money, I could have had a really good scholarship…”

Linda knew that a college degree would have a major impact on her life, and that motivated her:

Again, I'm just trying to be somebody's boss, I don't care what field they're in. I just want to get to where I get to, get these degrees, get this money, get a house, get a car. I just want a house and a car, that's all I want. That's literally all I want. I want an apartment, I want to see my name on it. It's mine, [and] I own it.

Summary. All participants found motivation from various sources. These sources included from their families, which included both siblings and parents, their own internal motivation, as well as the cost and value of an education. Participants were motivated by the fact that they didn’t want to let anyone down, whether it was themselves or the people who served as motivators and supporters throughout the transition from high school to college.

Tensions Adjusting to College

All participants faced struggles adjusting to the college environment, albeit in various ways. Some participants experienced academic struggles, difficulty fitting in, and shifting relationships and responsibilities. The academic struggles faced included having to change majors and feeling academically unprepared. Some participants struggled to find their place socially within the university, while others grappled with the new environment overall—specifically the wealth disparities on campus. Lastly, many of the participants struggled with balancing their academic and family obligations.
Academic struggles. Mark initially enter WU as a computer science major, but felt unprepared when he began his introduction to computer science class:

When I first started, I found out that there was AP computer science in high school. I'm like "What? Is that a thing?" I had no idea, so a lot of the kids there in my classes had taken that, so for me it didn't feel like a fundamental course. It was like use what you already know. I struggled a lot freshman year, so I ended up switching majors.

Before he switched majors, he spoke with Mr. Avery, who alleviated his fears:

I was in his office at least twice a week, because I knew that I came in with the mindset that this is really what I want to do, so it was hard for me to feel like I couldn't do it. I was trying to get advice to see if I was making the right decision, but I just knew. He helped me realize that everyone switches majors. Not everyone, but a good amount of people end up not doing what they thought they were going to do when they came to college, and that it was okay. So, that if I still found a way to do what I'm interested in without having to go through that route then I should be okay. I looked into other majors and I thought management information systems was a way for me to still be into technology without doing computer science.

Cassandra also faced some academic struggles while at WU. In addition to being a biology major, she was also on the pre-health track. When she had her first meeting with her pre-health advisor during her first year, she was excited to learn more about what her options were, but that did not happen after the advisor told her that she wouldn’t be able to attain her goal of medical school:

That first meeting with her was so bad. I ended up leaving there in tears…we ended up both very frustrated. [I felt like she was saying] “you're not smart enough to go to this school. There are no options for you here.” I was just like, wow, cool, what's the point in me trying? I think, because I did struggle a lot, I think my GPA was a 2.95. I couldn't really get it higher, so for her to say that it was like I barely tried at all. I heard that, so I'm thinking about trying to go to med school…she didn't give me the resources to know what else I could do to potentially help my record.

Linda also had to change her major. As Beam scholar, she initially was enrolled in the university’s general studies program for a semester for additional academic support, and transitioned into the nursing major second semester of her first year. That was when she realized it was too difficult to complete the nursing program because of the layout of the curriculum for
Beam students, who are enrolled in a general studies program during the first semester of their first year before moving onto their specific major curriculum during the spring semester:

Before I was Human Services and Deaf Culture, I was a Nursing Major…[but] classes were full, or I took them too late and now I have to take like, four hard courses all at the same time. I'm not equipped for that. I know where I came from, I know where I stand academically. I cannot do Calculus, Biology, A and P, and some other stuff, chemistry all at the same time. Whereas other people [non-Beam scholars], they don't have to take the General Studies program—they take two and two [core classes at once]. That really messed me up—sorry to throw Beam under the bus, but it I did, cause I definitely wanted to get my degree in Nursing, be a nurse, and get my masters in Nursing.

In addition to having to change her major, Linda struggled with her writing skills initially since she never learned how to be a strong writer in high school, but was able to learn how to become a better writer during Beam’s summer program:

[I] learned how to look up sources and check my work, and I became a stronger writer because of the summer immersion program. I don't think I had [those skills in my high school], 'cause my senior thesis was, to find some information, tell me about it, then, here it is. They gave me like a packet of directions, but you want a 30 page paper and a PowerPoint, like, you're not showing me what to do, I don't know what to do with this material. You're just telling me what you want, but I don't know [how to get to that point].

Difficulty fitting in. Other participants initially struggled to find their place on campus. Jessica found that many of the Black students on campus were focused almost exclusively on race, which made it difficult to discuss other things:

I felt like sometimes it was really frustrating for me because I don't know if I already accepted it or become used to the idea that I'm at a PWI and I just need to make do of what's best and reach out to opportunities that my peers are doing. It was hard for me to be that weird one student of color who didn't hang at the [cultural organizations on campus]. It was just weird for me to not be that student to just always be involved there because it wasn't a welcoming environment for me.

Eventually, Jessica joined two other organizations on campus—the Social Enterprise Student Association and a group for Latino professionals. Within those spaces, she said, she could be her “authentic self.”
Cassandra also initially had difficulty finding her place within the university. She had difficulty connecting with other Black students at WU because of what she felt was overemphasis on maintaining their Blackness in a predominantly White institution. Her high school experience was vastly different in that it was mostly Black and Latino, so enrolling at WU was an adjustment. She also did not feel as welcomed by other Black students when she arrived on campus, finding that students were quick to stereotype her based on the city where she grew up:

I'm trying not to be this girl from Brockton who ... when you say Brockton to somebody from Boston, they say "Oh, you're from there." I'm like "No, I made it out, we're good." That really did not help at all, in terms of making Black friends.

Cassandra eventually joined InterVarsity Multi-Ethnic Christian Fellowship and Unity Gospel Ensemble on campus, two groups where she felt as though she could just be herself. After attending an InterVarsity meeting during her first semester and being overwhelmed that its members were primarily Asian, Cassandra did not return. However, members of the group routinely would reach out to her and ask her when she was going to return:

So, I went second semester and I went with a lot more openness and a lot less closed off mind, and I was just like "Wow, these people actually care for me. They care for the Black part of me. They want to learn more and more. They want to hear more of my story. They actually want to hear my voice in this space.

Cassandra has remained involved with InterVarsity ever since the second semester of her first year, and has taken on a leadership role within Unity Gospel.

Kendra also struggled with a sense of belonging on campus. As a way to take herself more out of her comfort zone, she often would ask her Beam peers to accompany her to events on campus so she wouldn’t feel as alone:

I didn't know my place. I think there's a personal space that I've carved out for myself and so I'm more comfortable doing things alone. [During her first year] I always wanted to bring somebody with me to go to A, B, and C, [which] probably hindered me, so I'm not doing that as much.. I think I found a personal space to do that, but in terms of a space, I found a niche that worked where at the college I feel like, it's not so much that I don't
have a niche, but I'm just floating. If I didn't have what I have now, then I would be lost. I feel like if I didn't have so many resources, I would just think, "I don't know what any of this means," and I wouldn't be able to make sense out of it.

Wealth disparities. Some of the participants discussed the wealth disparities on campus and the frustrations they faced surrounding it. In addition to being a large institution of over 17,000 students, WU’s international student population is nearly 20%. Since international students are not eligible for need based aid, many of these student’s families are paying the full cost of tuition, room and board and fees, which is over $60,000 per year. Linda said the wealth disparities made her realize her socioeconomic status:

I grew up poor and didn't know I was poor. So I thought food stamps was a thing that everyone got. So, realizing that coming in to college, and getting older, I was thinking "oh no, I'm not gonna be on food stamps, I don't want to do any of that. I want to be able to buy my own food, even though I can get like, five things for 100 dollars.

Jessica also struggled with the wealth gap between herself and some of her classmates, and her emotions surrounding it:

The wealth in general [here] is just like they're flaunting money everywhere. Here's me coming from really humble beginnings and just trying to go about my day and they're carrying Louis Vuitton's to class. So, that was hard. I was like, oh what's going on here? It was weird. I think being surrounded by wealth at a predominantly white institution was a lot for me.

Kendra also discussed struggling while fitting into a new environment, including new socioeconomic surroundings:

I think my first year, I was struggling with myself and high school me and then everything that's going around me, in terms of environment, and new environment, and new people, and wealth and socioeconomic stuff.... All of that just came upon me, and I was just stressed.

Shifting relationships. Most of the participants faced shifting relationships with their family as they transitioned from high school to college. They often found their academic and
familial responsibilities at odds with each other. Jessica, Kendra and Linda all struggled with shifting relationships or roles within their family.

Jessica’s relationship with her mother gradually shifted once she moved to campus. Since her mother only speaks Spanish, Jessica served as her mother’s translator:

One thing that was especially hard for me was dealing with my mother because my mother doesn't speak any English so I was always the one who would write her letters and pay her bills and do all this stuff. When I was gone and wasn't living at home anymore it was kind of hard for her to do that. She would always call me, I'm going to go home to do this or address this. That was hard for me to tell her no, I have work to do. Then she kind of started understanding, oh I need to back off and try to start doing things for myself. I think that was the hardest part for me.

When asked how she handled the shift, she responded:

I'm very direct with my mom. I just kind of told her I'm super busy at school. I had a job on campus too. I'm super busy doing all these things and I was part of these clubs and I wanted to do these different activities and I was like, hey I can't keep doing this. I can help you if you need something if it's any emergency but I just can't. She was just like, okay I understand. She would keep asking me to do these things even though she said she understand but I just kept ignoring. There would be points I'd turn off my phone and just be like, all right Ma, you don't get it then I'm turning my phone off. Then when I started turning off my phone and she couldn't talk to me anymore, she was like, oh okay I'll talk to her about other things and now she gets it more.

However, there were times when being direct was not appropriate. Jessica also found herself in situation where her mother asked her to counsel her older brother when he was struggling in college:

My older brother is super immature. His first semester in college, he flunked, and his second semester he flunked again. My mother was paying for him to go to school, he didn't get any academic scholarships the way I did. For me it was really hard. During my time here in college having to be my mom's support system and she didn't have any money and she was paying for my brother to go to school and he was messing up and so she would come talk to me to talk to my brother who's older than me to get him to understand like stop, she's wasting money, basically wasting money but she's spending money for you to go to school and you're not taking advantages of the opportunity. That was really hard at times during the semester when to hear my mom cry over the school and sit here and have a panic attack and I had an exam the next day and I couldn't just be like, okay mom I can't talk to you right now. I can't turn off my phone for that. Things like that were really hard my freshman year.
As a native Bostonian, Jessica felt internal conflict about attending a college that is gentrifying the neighborhoods around it—and often takes over buildings and homes occupied by members of the community:

How can I go to this institution when these people—I feel like I'm a part of the problem. These are the same people I would advocate against—like they're out here gentrifying communities and they could be kicking out my mother, and I'm here going to school here, but I'm going to school here for free. It was like what option do I really have? I think that was kind of challenging at first. It's still something I think about daily.

Kendra struggled with helping her parents understand how much time and effort she put into her studies, as well as how much her education costs:

... because they've never really been here to see me, to do it, I don't think they realize the amount [of effort and money]… I just don't think that they'll ever, since they're not really paying for it. I feel like they have the blessing, but it may be a curse to me. It's very easy to not understand what it takes to be successful in college. I don't think they fully grasp what I want to do because of that. But I constantly see it, constantly see how much my books cost and all of that, whereas they don't really need to, because they don't have to. I think once I show them the bill, or I try to show them the bill…I'm going to show them again, though. I don't think they understand.

Kendra’s major of international business requires that she study and work abroad for one year of her Bachelor’s program—something her parents don’t understand: “They still don't get why I'm going to study abroad in France or why I’m trying to go to California for a job. It’s hard [trying to get them to understand].”

Linda also experienced shifts in her relationship with both her peers and her extended family after the death of her mother. Linda said the loss of her mother changed her entire personality: “It's like they [her peers] don’t really know exactly what I'm going through, I'm different now, I don't ... I'm not the same. I don't feel the same. I don't act the same.” Even Linda’s relationship with her extended family changed:

I had to pretend that I'm okay so that they don't fall apart. And everyone's looking at me because, in my family my mom's kind of like the glue. They don't know how to function without her, they still don't know how to function without her, so now, involuntarily, out
of nowhere, I now have this role that she once filled, where I'm not like a mediator, but now I'm one of those important people. I need to know what's going on in the family. So that definitely changed who I am, and changed me a lot to who I am today. After that…I speak my mind, I say what I have to say, I just don't hold back anymore. I don't get bullied anymore, I don't. I stand up for myself, I just don't have time or patience to really have to deal with others, what I'm dealing with.

**Summary.** All participants faced tensions while adjusting to college. Those tensions stemmed from academic struggles, difficulty fitting in, and shifting relationships with their families and peers. When faced with these tensions, the participants had to make difficult decisions—whether that meant changing a major, finding a space where they could thrive or learning how to speak their minds when necessary.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed the themes developed from interviews with five first-generation, African American college students. The themes discussed revolved around sources of support and sources of motivation participants relied on during transition from high school to college, as well as the difficulties they faced during their transition. The sources of support discussed were community organizations, including college prep programs and church, significant adult figures (mothers, school counselors and others), as well as the Beam program. Participants were motivated by their family, themselves and the cost of an education and how gaining a college degree could impact their lives. The difficulties that the participants faced included academic struggles, difficulty fitting in, handling wealth disparities on campus, and shifting roles and responsibilities with their families. The next chapter will discuss how the findings of this study relate to the theoretical framework and the literature, and will provide suggestions for further research and practice.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This study addressed the college readiness of first-generation, African American college students through the lens of community cultural wealth. Community cultural wealth, a critical race theory based response to the concept of cultural capital, consists of six types of capital, five of which were used in this study—navigational, social, familial, aspirational, and resistant. The research question this study addressed was: “What role does community cultural wealth play in impacting the African American, first-generation students’ level of college readiness?”

The findings of this study illustrate that the participants relied on their capital in various ways throughout the transition from high school to college. By relying on their community cultural wealth, they improved both their academic behaviors and contextual skills and awareness—two of the key components of college readiness. This chapter will discuss the findings of this study: how multiple streams of support enabled students to have a smoother transition, participants relied on aspirational and resistant capital as a means of motivation, and when faced with obstacles participants persevered. Next, it will discuss how those findings connect to the theoretical framework and the literature. Finally, it will discuss suggestions for further research and the limitations of the study before concluding.

Findings

There are three major themes from the data—sources of support, sources of motivation and tensions adjusting to college—that led to the findings that will be discussed in this chapter. The three major findings are: how multiple streams of support enabled participants to have a smoother transition by relying on mentors and adults, how participants relied on aspirational and resistant capital as a means of motivation, and how participants persevered through obstacles.
Multiple Streams of Support Enabled Smoother Transition

All participants derived support from various sources, which enabled them to have a smoother transition from high school to college. Specifically, participants relied on mentors and other key adults, parental and sibling support, and college preparatory programs as their primary forms of support. These programs and adults provided both the guidance and information necessary for the participants to make a successful transition from high school to college.

Mentors and supportive adults. The participants relied on their mentors and other adults throughout their transition from high school to college, and by all accounts, that support was crucial to their success. Mark’s support figure for Beam was his English teacher, and Linda asked her mentors to nominate her for the Beam program. Kendra trusted her mentor so much that she eventually put her mentor in touch with her own friends so that she could also advise them through the college process. Jessica’s supportive adult—the mother of a friend—made sure that Jessica went on college tours, walked her through the college application process, and ensured that she applied to the Beam program. The guidance of these adults provided the participants with advice and knowledge regarding the college process that they were unable to gain from their parents.

Parent and sibling support. Although parents were not able to provide guidance during the application process, participants were both supported and inspired by their parents, and in some cases, their parents and siblings. Jessica’s mother believed her daughter would receive a better education at a private school, so Jessica enrolled in one. Linda’s mother chose to enroll her in a vocational/technical high school so that she would have a working knowledge of a trade in case she did not go to college. Kendra was motivated by wanting to provide for her parents in the future, and recognized that going to college would enable her to do so. Mark and Cassandra had
close relationships with their older brothers, both of whom provided guidance and served as a source of motivation for their younger siblings. The support of the participants’ parents and the example set by their siblings enabled the participants to make a smoother transition from high school to college.

**College preparatory programs.** All the participants relied on organizations within their community to help them throughout the college process and enable them to become more knowledgeable about the college process. Jessica, Linda, Kendra, and Mark relied on college prep programs within their communities to help them prepare for the SATs and offset the costs associated with the exams. Although Cassandra was not enrolled in any college preparatory programs, she was very active within her church community, which she relied on as a source of motivation throughout her transition. In addition to the SAT preparation, the college preparatory programs also provided the participants with access to mentors, who they relied on throughout their transition.

**Participants Relied on Aspirational and Resistant Capital as Means of Motivation**

All the participants had a strong sense of self-motivation toward achieving their goals of a college education. While the rationale for obtaining a college degree was different for each student, the final goal was the same: to be a college graduate. Jessica and Kendra wanted to be able to provide for their families and make their parents proud. Linda wanted to be able to own her own home and make a good salary:

I understand money can hold a lot of people back, but even then I was so determined, like, look, if I'm hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, I'm still gonna make it. Like, I need to. I don't know where I'm gonna get it from, but I'm gonna make it work.

Mark and Cassandra both knew the value of an education after watching their older brothers enroll and succeed in college. Mark said that watching his brother succeed helped him
“aim towards the right goals,” and Cassandra described her brother as her “role model.” This drive—coupled with their various sources of motivation and support—provided them with the ability to be successful during their transition and remain in college.

When faced with stereotypes or those who underestimated their abilities, the participants used that as motivation to achieve their goals. Both Jessica and Kendra felt as though their school counselors underestimated their abilities and only supported them after they were admitted to WU, while Cassandra faced judgment from her Black peers because of the city she grew up in.

**When Faced with Obstacles, Participants Persevered**

The participants faced various obstacles during their transition from high school to college, ranging from academic struggles, difficulty fitting in, dealing with socioeconomic differences, and shifting relationships with their families. Mark, Linda, and Cassandra faced academic challenges, which caused Mark and Linda to change their initial majors. Jessica, Kendra, and Cassandra struggled with finding a place for themselves within the university. Most of the participants faced struggles with how their relationship with their families shifted once they enrolled in college.

**Connection to Theoretical Framework**

This study focused on how first-generation, African American college students use community cultural wealth to increase their level of college readiness, with a specific focus on how they use community cultural wealth to increase their contextual skills and awareness and academic behaviors, two components of college readiness. This section will discuss how the findings of the study relate to the theoretical framework. To review, community cultural wealth (CCW) is a critical race theory based response to the concept of cultural capital, which consists of six types of capital, five of which were used for this study—navigational, social, familial,
aspirational, and resistant. Navigational capital refers to one’s ability to navigate various social institutions. Social capital refers to one’s access to networks of people and community resources. Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge shared by a family. Aspirational capital refers to the “ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005, p. 78).” Resistant capital refers to the knowledge created from challenging inequality.

Since CCW is grounded in critical race theory, it reframes the discussion of people of color from one focused on deficit and skills that people of color do not have to one focused on the variety of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities that people of color possess. While Yosso’s initial model presented the forms of capital as six distinct forms, this study illustrated that the different types of capital influence each other. Specifically, social and familial capital impacted navigational capital, while familial capital and resistant capital both influenced participants’ aspirational capital.

Social, Familial and Navigational Capital

The data showed that social and familial capital played a large role in the college readiness of the participants, all of whom utilized resources from their community or family to as a means of gaining more knowledge or as a source of support. This, in turn, helped them increase their navigational capital.

Participants used their social and familial capital as a way to develop their navigational capital. All of the participants relied on their mentors, community-based organizations, or siblings to help them navigate their transition from high school to college. Cassandra navigated largely without support services from WU, and relied on her classmate Virginia and her brother during her first year in college. Jessica’s primary support in high school was her best friend’s
mother, who prepared her to apply for the Beam program. Mark relied on his brother and English teacher. Both Kendra and Linda leaned on their mentors from their college prep programs who nominated them for Beam and assisted them throughout the college process.

The manner in which the participants relied on their social networks as a way to assist them navigate the college process is echoed the literature, which finds that navigational capital acknowledges both the drive of an individual, as well as the connection to social networks that lead to navigation of a community. In their study of first-generation doctoral students, Gardner and Holley (2011) found that students stated they “didn’t have a clue” about how to begin the college process (p. 87). They found that each of their participants encountered at least one individual who had a degree and was able to provide a connection for them to higher education, and that those relationships with those holding more social and cultural capital was meaningful. For the participants, these people were their key adult figures— their teacher, their mentors, their college counselor, their scholarship advisor and their siblings. These were also the people they turned to during their transition from high school to college when they faced obstacles. Family was a vital source of both inspiration and support for participants. Cassandra and Mark relied on the guidance of their older brothers. That guidance enabled both Cassandra and Mark to have a better understanding of what to expect during the college admissions process. Jessica also discussed being grateful at times that she attended college close to home because it enabled her to escape campus during stressful times, such as exam week, and surround herself with the comforts of home and her family.

Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital refers to a student’s ability to persevere, and is inspired in part by a “culture of possibility” that “represent the creation of a history that would break the links
between parents’ current occupational status and their children’s future academic attainment” (Gandara, 1995, p. 55, as cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Participants’ aspirations and their desire to resist stereotypes were their primary sources of motivation.

Participants’ aspirations to attend college were inspired by their mentors, parents and siblings. Mark was inspired by his mom, brother, and English teacher. Linda and Kendra both leaned on their mentors for guidance and support throughout the college application process. The data from this study found two primary sources of aspirational capital: parents and the students themselves. Parents were also instrumental in creating a culture in which the value of education was emphasized. Although none of the participants’ parents attended college, all of their parents understood that education was the primary way to elevate their social status and give them a better life and more income. This parental behavior is also found in the literature. In his study of high school students, Howard (2003) found that parents played a large role in influencing the students’ desire to attend college. Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella and Hagedorn (1999) found that while encouragement and support from family was found in their study of both Black and White students, they found that support from family played a larger role in the persistence of Black students than their academic performance in college did.

However, the aspirations of college also came from within the participants themselves. Jessica spoke of wanting to achieve the “American Dream.” Mark and Cassandra aspired to follow in their older brothers’ footsteps and worked toward achieving their goal of a college degree. Linda spoke at length about wanting to receive a college degree to have a better life. All participants relied heavily on their personal goal of enrolling in college and obtain a college degree. This finding also echoed the literature. In their study of African American college students, Hwang, Echols, and Vrongistinos (2002) found that the students relied on a
combination of motivational modes: intrinsic, extrinsic, future, and social. Since this was a major finding of this study, it underscores that the self-motivation of this population should not be diminished.

**Resistant Capital**

The data showed that the participants resisted stereotypes of themselves. Several of the participants in this study discussed wanting to break—or resist—the stereotypes that others may have of them because of their race. Jessica spoke about “not wanting to be a statistic” or viewed as the “dumb Black girl” in a class comprised of mostly white males. Kendra spoke about how some of her classmates in high school believed she was only admitted to Williams University because she was Black, as opposed to because of her own merits. Linda discussed wanting to make more money and own a home, and break the cycle of poverty that she faced.

The data echoed recent literature regarding using stereotypes as motivation. African American males who participated in Baber’s 2014 study on transitions from high school to college said that they constantly found themselves having to overcome stereotypes associated with their race and barriers, which fostered a sense of resiliency within the students who were interviewed. Harper’s (2015) study of black male students in leadership positions showed that young men of color resisted stereotypes in part through leadership roles on campus and their involvement in student organizations. Although most participants in this study were female, four of the five participants discussed their involvement in student organizations and their roles within student leadership. Two of the participants discussed feeling more of their authentic self within their student organizations based on interests and academics as opposed to the university’s cultural student organizations.
Connection to Literature

This section will discuss how the findings of this study connect to the literature. To review, college readiness has traditionally been measured through a student’s high school grade point average and performance on standardized testing. However, there has recently been a shift in the definition of college readiness. According to Conley (2008b), there are four components to college readiness: key cognitive strategies (the skills and knowledge required in order to ensure that students can meet the rigor of college academics), key content areas (the subjects used to develop foundational skills of students through teaching and learning, academic behaviors (a set of abilities that relate to how students create self-awareness and self-monitor themselves academically) and contextual skills and awareness (increasing the student’s understanding and knowledge). This study focused specifically on academic behaviors and contextual skills and awareness since key cognitive strategies and key content areas align with the traditional measurements of college readiness.

The literature illustrated that, separately, Black and first-generation students perform poorly on traditional measurements of college readiness, but also found that their academic behaviors were impacted by their level of self-efficacy and their ability to adjust to a new environment, while their contextual skills and awareness was impacted by their level of college knowledge and their socioeconomic status. Separately, both populations relied on various forms of capital to increase their level of college readiness, specifically their academic behaviors and contextual skills and awareness.

Academic Behaviors

The literature showed that African American and first-generation students’ level of self-efficacy and ability to adjust to a new environment improved their academic behavior, one of the key components of college readiness. (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Pajares & Schunk,
The data confirmed this, and also expanded upon it.

All participants had a high level of self-motivation in that they had clearly set goals regarding applying for college and working toward that plan. Despite whatever obstacles each participant faced, they did not waiver from those goals. Mark, Jessica, and Linda all discussed their goal of getting into college, and cited their own level of motivation as a key factor. The data from this study agrees with the finding of Dennis et al., (2005), whose study on the role of motivation, parental support, and peer support in the academic success of first-generation student of color found that a student’s “motivation to attend college based on personal interest, intellectual curiosity, and the desire to attain a rewarding career” was found to be a positive predictor for how well they adjusted to college (p. 233).

The fact that participants relied on their aspirational and resistant capital as a means of motivation echoed the conclusion reached by Allen’s (1999) study, which found that a high level of self-motivation positively impacted the persistence of students of color. Sewell and Hauser (1980) and Qian and Blair (1999) found that an individual’s educational aspirations were crucial in achievement of that goal (as cited in McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Trusty (1998) found that parents were an important source in ensuring that their children do not lose the aspiration of attaining a college education. Hossler and Stage (1999) defined parental involvement in terms of parental encouragement and attitudes toward education. They found that parental encouragement was more important than a family’s income. The data from this study echoed that finding. The participants heavily relied on their parents as both a source of support and motivation.
Contextual Skills & Awareness

The literature showed that, separately, first-generation and African American students’ level of contextual skills and awareness was impacted by their levels of college knowledge and their socioeconomic status (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1991; Howard, 2003). A high level of college knowledge meant that a student was accurately informed about the college process, and thus can make well informed decisions, while a low socioeconomic status could contribute to incorrect estimations regarding the cost of college and could also impede a student from being able to afford the costs associated with applying for college, such as application fees, test preparation courses, and exam fees (An, 2013; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). The data from this study supported the literature’s findings with regard to college knowledge, but disagreed with the literature regarding the impact of socioeconomic status.

**College knowledge.** All participants relied on a variety of sources to increase their levels of college knowledge, including college prep programs, school counselors, siblings, and mentors. All participants relied on their peers in some way throughout their transition. The Beam participants had the advantage of coming into WU with a cohort of peers who they were able to form a close-knit bond with. Mark chose to surround himself with classmates in high school who had similar goals, and has lived with other Beam students since he enrolled at WU. Jessica, Kendra and Linda all spoke at length regarding how close they are with their fellow Beam participants, while Cassandra briefly discussed her reliance on a classmate at WU to help her navigate the city of Boston and to learn more about the resources for students at WU. Dennis et al., (2005) found that a lack of support from peers was a negative predictor of college adjustment the following spring, and also predicted a lower GPA.
The mentors and adults that the participants relied on during their transition from high school to college were one way that they tapped into their navigational capital—by finding individuals who had more knowledge about college and learning from them. Jessica, Kendra and Linda had key adults or mentors who served as their primary guides throughout the college process. This finding is echoed in much of the literature around the importance of mentorship within the college admissions process. The data echoed the finding of Thomas, Speight, and Witherspoon (2007), who found that students of color who were academically successful had the support of both their peers and their families. Reid and Moore (2008) found that first-generation students of color found supports from other adults, including teachers, mentors and school counselors.

Lastly, four out of the five participants utilized the support services provided by various college preparatory programs, and this support was either at the primary or secondary level. The various college prep programs that most of the participants belonged to provided them with information and support during the college application process that they did not receive from their high school. The support provided by the college prep programs enabled the participants to increase their college knowledge, and provided them with the necessary information to navigate the college process. This finding was echoed in the literature. Jayakumar, Vue, and Allen (2013) found that a college prep program based in Los Angeles provided more support for students during the college process than their high school did. Ghazzawi and Jagannathan (2011) found that enrollment in a college outreach program motivated students to attend college.

**Adjusting to new environment.** Several of the participants dealt with shifting relationships with their families once they enrolled in college. Both Jessica and Kendra struggled with striking a balance between their responsibilities as students and as daughters, while Linda’s
role with her extended family changed after the death of her mother. This finding was echoed in the literature. London (1989) interviewed first-generation students and their families to determine how family dynamics played a role in matriculation and how the students reconciled their family obligations with educational mobility. London found that the students he interviewed experienced “biographical and social dislocation” (p. 168) as they transition from high school to college. This led to feelings of confusion, conflict, isolation and anger (London, 1989).

Once they enrolled at WU, several of the participants felt as though they missed academic opportunities in high school once they got to college. Cassandra discussed not knowing that students could take AP or IB courses in high school, and in turn, gain college credit. Mark was not aware that AP Computer Science courses existed until he started an introduction to computer science class at WU and realized that many his classmates had taken the class. Despite tutoring, Mark realized he was unprepared for a computer science major and ultimately changed it. Given the academic preparation she received at her high school, Linda did not feel as though she could handle taking multiple core courses for her nursing major at the same time, so she ultimately made the decision to change her major. These experiences echoed the literature from Reid and Moore (2008) regarding feeling unprepared, and St. John et al., (2005) finding of students feeling intimidated or feeling as though their peers were more knowledgeable than they were.

**Socioeconomic status.** For the Beam participants, socioeconomic status played a major role in their admissibility into WU. All applicants must submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is used to determine the financial need of an applicant’s family, and must have an estimated family contribution (EFC) of $0, which indicates that a student’s
family is not expected to contribute financially to their education. In addition, some of the college prep programs that participants were members of also required its participants to be low income students.

Contrary to the literature (Grodsky & Jones, 2004; Goldrick-Rab, 2006), the participants in this study did not express a lack of knowledge regarding the cost of college. However, the lack of a concern regarding the actual cost of college may be due, in part, to the information they were given by the various college prep organizations they were involved in. This underscores, again, the importance of first-generation, African American students having access to accurate information about the college process.

However, socioeconomic status had varying effects on the participants. Most expressed a concern of not being able to afford various parts of the process, such as application fees, access to test prep courses or the SAT exams themselves, or feeling relieved that receiving a full scholarship through Beam could ease the burden of debt. Concerns regarding the cost of college was also evident in the literature (An, 2013; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). Jessica expressed concern about how much weight was placed on her SAT results, and recognized that she needed to do well because she could not afford to retake the exam. Mark was grateful that Jeter’s Leaders covered many of his college application process costs:

I would want to go to Saturday meetings because I know that I would gain something out of it, which I would have to pay for somewhere else, like the SAT prep. Those are expensive, and we got those for free through the leadership program.

Kendra was able to join New Urban Arts because she had financial need: “Because I didn't have the money to buy anything, I went to an arts program. I basically told them my situation and they gave me a bunch of free resources.” She was relieved when she received her full scholarship through the Beam program:
I think to my mom and my dad I got closer and I also think that it helped my parents in the sense that they don't have to pay. So that burden is not on me. I think one of the burdens when I was applying was I really wanted to get into a program where my parents wouldn't have to pay. Because they had to do so much. I think that helped me a lot knowing that they don't have to worry about that. That was my main concern for them.

Once they enrolled at WU, many of the participants found themselves more aware of their socioeconomic status, which led to conflicting feelings. This was echoed by Aries and Seider (2005)’s study on low-income students found that significant disparities of wealth “heightened awareness of class, and led to feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, deficiency, exclusion, and powerlessness” (p. 419). In addition, the shifting responsibilities faced by several of the participants was also found in Winkle and Wagner’s 2009 study of Black women who faced a difficult transition adjusting to the campus environment, and often felt alienated from the rest of campus due to their race and gender.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

There are a wealth of opportunities for further research as a result of this study. First, this study could be replicated utilizing a larger number of participants, by using another design method, or focusing on students at two-year institutions. Due to the selectivity of WU, this study could also be carried out at a less selective college or university, or one that does not emphasize standardized testing as part of the admissions process.

Data also showed the importance of support once students began college. It may be worth investigating what types of relationships—ones with faculty, staff or peers—contribute the most to the persistence of first-generation, African American students. Since the Black cultural organizations at WU were not involved in this study, it could also be beneficial to examine the role of cultural organizations in the academic success of first-generation, African American students.
Several of the participants spoke about not feeling fully accepted by other African American students, and feeling as though other Black students were performing their Blackness as a way to cope with their new environment. Further research could examine how the first-generation, Black student population transition into a PWI through cultural identity models such as Cross’ (1971). While this study did not examine the role of linguistic capital on the college readiness of first-generation, African American college students, future research could examine the role of language in the college readiness of this population, specifically the use of code-switching, or the use of more than one language while communicating. Since the participants in this study were enrolled at a PWI, it could be beneficial to examine how the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) affected their transition to college, as well as their relationships with their peers. In her study of how African American students at PWIs utilized AAVE, Glenn (2010) found that most of the participants strongly related the use of AAVE to their identity as African Americans, and that the use of Standard English showed identification “with majority culture or distance from the African American culture” (p. 120): “When African Americans elect not to use AAVE when it is an accepted norm, it conveys distance from the African American community, which can also convey the internalization of negative stereotypes often associated with African American people (Scott, 2004; Ronkin & Karn, 1999, as cited in Glenn, 2010, p. 119).”

Cassandra’s transition from high school to college as a non-Beam student is also worthy of exploration. Since she was not a member of the Beam program, she did not receive the same level of academic and transitional support available to students who were involved with the program. Further research could involve a comparative analysis between the transitional experiences of Beam and non-Beam students.
This study found that all participants were informed about the college process, either through their involvement with college prep programs or through watching their siblings go through the process before them. This finding could lead to another study on the manner first-generation and African American students gain information about the college process. Since all participants faced obstacles during their transition from high school to college, further research could examine specifically how students cope with the stress of the transition and how they reconcile their student and familial responsibilities. The data revealed that most of the participants had negative interactions with their school counselors. A suggestion for future research could be to examine students’ level of college readiness in relation to their interaction with their school counselors.

While this study focused on first-generation students who identified as African American as an attempt to begin to examine this intersectionality, further research should explore the experiences of first-generation students across all ethnicities, as well as genders. The experiences of first-generation and African American students are not homogeneous, and there is a need to further investigate both their levels of college readiness, as well as their persistence toward attaining a college degree. This study focused specifically on the transition from high school to college, however, it should be extended to examine what first-generation, African American students rely on after that first year in college.

Lastly, student affairs professionals can use the results of this study to help them develop best practices regarding how to support first-generation, African American college students. In addition to building initiatives that can support this population, diversity and multicultural recruitment student affairs staff can also assist in designing training for faculty and staff regarding challenges this population faces and how to nurture an environment in the classroom.
and across campus that supports first-generation, African American college students in an effort to create more cultural competency across an institution.

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations. One was the self-selection of the participants. Although 55 students were invited to participate in the study, only four accepted. One participant was told about the study from another participant and reached out to the researcher directly. In addition, out of the five participants who volunteered to participate in this study, four were female, and one was male. Because of the low response rate of participants, it is possible that the students who did participate in the study are not reflective of the student population of first-generation, African American students as a whole.

The fact that four out of the five participants were members of the Beam program was a limitation as well. The data showed that Beam student’s transitions were successful due to the additional support they received as scholarship recipients. As a result of the self-selection of the participants, this study did not fully examine the transitional experiences of students like Cassandra who did not receive additional academic support through the Beam program. In addition, the participants enrolled in college immediately following high school, so the findings may not hold for students who did not enroll in college immediately after high school.

Another limitation was the noninvolvement of the Black cultural student organizations at WU during the recruitment of participants. Their involvement could have provided more access to more first-generation, African American students, which could have created both a larger sample size and more diverse experiences. The fact that four of the five participants were on a full scholarship through the Beam program and received additional academic support not
available to all students was another limitation because the experiences of Beam participants may be different from those of other students.

Lastly, the selectivity of admissions into Williams University was another limitation. Traditional acceptance into WU requires overall academic profiles that were above what most these participants had—four out of the five participants gained acceptance through Beam program, while one was admitted outright.

**Recommendations for practice**

The findings suggest several recommendations for practice that could further ease the transition from high school to college of first-generation, African American college students. The following recommendations for practice outline ways that colleges and universities can encourage first-generation, African American college students to draw on their capital and enable them to be successful.

**Support programs for all students from underrepresented communities.** The findings illustrated the value of support programs for first-generation, African American students, and lead to the first practical recommendation: creation of on campus support programs for all students from underrepresented communities. The Beam participants came into WU with a strong support system comprised of advisors and their peers. However, Cassandra—the sole participant who was not a member of Beam—did not have access to that same level of support:

So it was like, I paid all this money, I could have had a really good scholarship...all my friends who are part of those programs are benefiting so much from them. Being in those programs ...provide so much support and if you're not part of those programs you're kind of by yourself. I didn't feel like I had a place in the institution until I did join the gospel choir. It's really all these people got so much support from the [institution], all these programs. Like how to travel the city as a Black student or these little things that I probably would have benefitted from because they are only available to these scholars.
Cassandra’s experience underscores the importance of providing support services for all students from underrepresented populations. If she had not been able to rely on her brother for help navigating college life in Boston, her transition from high school to college could have been even more difficult. Cassandra’s experience also illustrates that it is important for colleges to make their resources more available to students from all underrepresented backgrounds. Although Cassandra did not receive a scholarship through the Beam program, she still faced some of the same challenges as a first-generation, African American student.

**De-emphasize test scores.** The Beam participants interviewed in this study received SAT results that were below the academic profile of the incoming class of their university, which means that if they had not applied to WU through the Beam program, it was unlikely that they would have been admitted into the university. This illustrates that when students of color who are also first-generation are evaluated without an emphasis on their standardized test results, they can succeed if they are in the right environment and provided with the necessary support. This leads to a practical implication of de-emphasizing the importance of test scores when evaluating traditionally underrepresented student populations, and focusing instead on the non-academic factors that can illustrate a student’s readiness for college.

While nearly every college is concerned about recruiting an academically strong incoming class, an excessive focus on test scores places students who are not excellent test takers—but still could be successful at an institution—at a disadvantage. When asked if their performance on the SAT or ACT exams were a strong indicator of their readiness for college, they all said no; Cassandra noted that racial biases are imbedded within the exams.

The success of the participants illustrate that test scores are not the best predictor of success, especially for a population of students that does not always have same access to test
preparation or advanced/college prep coursework. Especially in relation to underrepresented populations, who often do not have access to the education or college prep resources, there is a need to look beyond their test scores. Within the United States, over 800 colleges and universities have started to deemphasize SAT or ACT results within the admissions process. A joint report in 2014 between William Hiss, Valerie Franks, and the National Association for College Admission Counseling examined these test optional colleges, and compared the results between students who submitted standardized test results to test optional institutions and those who did not. Hiss found that students with higher high school GPAs performed well in college, while those with lower high school GPAs earned lower cumulative college GPAs. This remained the case even if the students who had lower high school GPAs had higher standardized test results. Hiss also found that those who were less likely to submit standardized test results were more likely to be the first in their family to attend college, students of color, female, and Pell Grant recipients (Hiss & Franks, 2014). The report also echoed the findings of earlier research, which found that high school grade point average is the strongest prediction of college performance.

School counselors and increased cultural competence. Most of the participants rarely had interactions with their school counselors, and when they did, those interactions were often negative. Several participants felt pigeonholed by their counselors, which led to them not receiving the same academic opportunities as others. Jessica and Kendra both discussed their experiences, and Cassandra described purposely failing her CNA exam so that she did not fulfill what she perceived as the stereotype of students who graduated from her high school:

I didn't want to fit into the mold of being a nurse, I had a freak out moment… I didn't want to do that. They're [her high school] not preparing you. Those things, becoming a mechanical engineer or going to culinary school, which is pretty big, all of the students they just didn't do that next step [going beyond the trade education and enrolling in
They were just like "Oh, this is where you're gonna end. This is the highest level you're gonna reach.

School counselors hold a vital role in the transition from high school to college, and are particularly crucial to the academic success of first-generation students (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). They often are the first source of knowledge for their students about the college process. Because of this, it is important that counselors be both culturally competent and aware of their own biases. It’s important to empower students—and not make them doubt their own abilities—as they prepare to transition from high school to college. Foster (2009) noted that many Black students in public schools face circumstances where their intellectual ability and competence are questioned, which makes them vulnerable (p.157). McCray, Grant, & Beachum (2010) state that educators need to work to reduce their own prejudices, biases, stigmatization and stereotyping. Actively working to reduce one’s own biases is especially important when working with traditionally underrepresented populations such as first-generation, African American college students who rely on their counselors to both advise and advocate for them throughout the college process.

The participants in this study spoke about staff at both the secondary and post-secondary levels who they felt did not support their transition from high school to college. In addition to feeling pigeonholed by their school counselors, participants also had negative interactions with teachers, faculty, and staff. Cassandra and Jessica’s interactions with their advisor and school counselor respectively illustrated the need for increased cultural competence by those who are working directly with traditionally underrepresented students. This is the basis for the suggestion of increased cultural competency for school counselors. However, this suggestion should be applied to all staff and teachers at the secondary level, as well as faculty and staff at the post-secondary level.
Ladson-Billings (1995) expressed the need for what she called “culturally relevant teaching,” which she defined as having three principles: “(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (p. 160).” Teachers who exhibit cultural competence use their student’s culture as a vehicle for learning—this is similar to the goal of community cultural wealth and its focus on empowering students.

**Mentors and access to those with capital.** One way to encourage first-generation, African American students to draw on their own capital is to first help them realize that they have capital in the first place. The participants in this study all had some form of a mentor, whether it was an English teacher, a sibling, a best friend’s mother or mentors through a college prep program. In all of those instances, their mentors were those who had accessed the capital that the participants were trying to gain. These mentorships were crucial in providing the students with college knowledge, support and motivation. Cooper, Denner and Lopez (1999) found that mentors can act as “culture brokers” when they help students gain educational experiences and the skills required for academic success.

Since students are most likely to form a bond with a mentor closer to their own age (Cooper, 2002), one suggestion is to pair incoming first-generation college students with older, or returning, first-generation college students who can provide both support and guidance while in college. Pairing new students with returning students can also remind to new students that they are not alone, and that they can achieve the dreams they have set out to.

Another suggestion for practice is the implementation of faculty mentoring for this specific student population, as well as other underrepresented student populations. Faculty play a
major role in helping students feel a sense of belonging on campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Faculty mentoring of first-generation students serve as a way to support students and help them build relationships within the campus that will make them feel more engaged, and potentially provide them with an outlet while they are enrolled at a PWI:

“Given their severe underrepresentation and encounters with "every day racism" and microaggressions at PWIs, minoritized students need advocates who can validate their competence, belongingness, and racialized experiences” (Harper, 2013, p. 196).

A final suggestion regarding how first-generation, African American college students can gain access to capital is through the creation of partnerships between high schools and non-profits like the community-based organizations utilized by the majority of the participants. Most participants attended larger secondary schools where there were high student to counselor ratios. Thus, participants relied heavily on the resources of the college prep focused community-based organizations. As a way to ensure all students who are members of traditionally underrepresented populations, it would be beneficial for secondary schools and these community-based organizations to form partnerships so that students are still able to gain access to information about the college process.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of first-generation, African American college students as they transitioned from high school to college, and to gather their self-reflections of their level of college readiness. Since there was an absence of research that focused on students who identified as both Black and first-generation, this study sought to gather their experiences as a way to determine best practices for educators at both the secondary and post-secondary level who work with this population. The narratives of five college students
revealed how they navigated the college process, their aspirations for attending college, their major supporters, and the obstacles they faced and how they overcame them.

The findings of the researcher showed that, when provided with support, resources and knowledge, students who are both Black and first-generation can succeed academically, and underscored the importance of ensuring that these students have the necessary support in order to be successful.
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Appendix A

Email requesting participation

DATE

My name is Ashley Battle and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. Under the guidance of Dr. Natalie Perry, I am preparing to conduct research for my doctoral thesis and would like to invite you to be a participant in my study. I will be interviewing first-generation, African American college students who are in their second, third, fourth, or fifth year of study at Northeastern.

The title of my study is “Creating my Village: An oral history examining the impact of Community Cultural Wealth on the College Readiness of First-generation, African American students.” The purpose of the study is to explore the college readiness of first-generation, African American college students, and how their use of family, social, and community resources impacted their level of college readiness. For the purposes of this study, first-generation status is defined as being on track to be the first person in your immediate family to complete a four-year college degree. Your participation in this study will enable me to contribute to research that is currently lacking in the field in two ways—exploring the intersectionality of being both first-generation and African American, and examining the college readiness of the population through their use of community and social networks. By participating in this study, you will be able to share your experiences preparing for college, navigating the college admissions process, and transitioning from high school to college. Additionally, it will allow you to discuss who and what helped and hindered you during the process.

To conduct this study, I am asking for volunteers to dedicate 90 minutes of their time to participate in an interview about their experiences. I would prefer to complete these interviews face-to-face at a location and time convenient for you. During the interview, I will ask you a series of questions about your transition from high school to college, and how your community helped and/or hindered that transition. With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. After the transcription is complete, you will have the opportunity to review it for accuracy and clarification.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Additionally, your participation in this study is strictly confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed. My advisor and I will be the only people aware of your involvement. Although there are no direct risks to you for taking part in this study, you may withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question.

By participating in this study, your experiences may help colleges provide better support to first-generation, African American students. A summary of the research findings and excerpts from each participant’s interview will be published in my dissertation. These results may also be used in future scholarly publications and presentations.

I ask that you please consider participating in this study. If you are selected to participate, you will receive a $20 gift card to a coffee shop or restaurant of your choice. If you meet the eligibility requirements and are comfortable with the purpose of this study and are willing to
participate, please let me know by (date) at battle.a@husky.neu.edu or call 323-819-2141. You will not be contacted again regarding this research.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ashley L. Battle

Doctoral Candidate

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator: Natalie Perry; Student Researcher: Ashley L. Battle
Title of Project: Creating my Village: An oral history examining the impact of Community Cultural Wealth on the College Readiness of First-generation, African American college students

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate student in their second year of study or beyond at Northeastern University who is African American/Black, and a first-generation college student. A first-generation college student is defined as someone whose parents have not completed a college degree.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to examine the college readiness of first-generation, African American students as a way to improve the support services offered for students of this population at the college level. The specific focus of this study is how the participants’ community and social networks impacted their level of college readiness and aided them during their transition from high school to college.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in one semi-structured, audio recorded interview with the student researcher that will take no more than 90 minutes.
During the interview, you will be asked to describe your experiences as you transitioned from high school to college, and how your community and social networks aided you during this transition. The interview will last no more than 90 minutes, and will take place in a face-to-face setting of your choice.

You retain the right to decline answering any questions at any time. With your permission, the interview will be recorded with a digital voice recorder and saved as an MP3 file for later transcription by a confidential third party, Rev.

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<tr>
<th>Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?</th>
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</table>

The interview will take place at a location you choose as a way to ensure confidentiality and a distraction-free interview space. The interview will last no more than 90 minutes. Participants will also be asked to review the transcriptions of their interview. This should take no more than 20 minutes.

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<tr>
<th>Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?</th>
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There is no foreseeable risk to you for taking part in this study. However, there may be discomfort as you reflect on the developed relationships with your stakeholders and their influences on your leadership. Therefore, any question that may provide discomfort may be declined.

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<tr>
<th>Will I benefit by being in this research?</th>
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</table>

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may assist both high schools and colleges in creating better support services for first-generation, African American students as they transition from high school to college.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Who will see the information about me?</th>
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Your participation in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers of this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project. The researcher will take every precaution to keep all information confidential. Research data is used only for reporting of the findings. Pseudonyms will be used for interviewees to protect identity and school names will not be disclosed. The research will only describe characteristics of the university. Audiotapes,
transcriptions and other identifying information will be kept in a personal locked cabinet and on a secure personal computer accessible only to the student researcher. All recordings and transcripts will be maintained by the student researcher until the thesis has been approved. Afterwards, all transcripts, recordings, and data files will be destroyed.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and can your participation can cease at any time. You can refuse to answer any question(s) you do not wish to answer. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the person primarily responsible for this research, Ashley L. Battle at battle.a@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact the Principal Investigator, Natalie Perry at n.perry@northeastern.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
This study has been approved by Northeastern University IRB.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will be given a $20 gift card as a token of gratitude for your participation in the study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There are no costs associated with this study.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

____________________________________________  ______________________

Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date

____________________________________________

Printed name of person above

____________________________________________  ______________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent  Date

____________________________________________

Printed name of person above
Appendix C

Interview Protocol & Questions

Thank you for being available to speak with me today. You have been selected to participate in this research study because you have identified yourself as someone who has a great deal to share about your experience as a first-generation, African American college student.

As I mentioned previously, I am in the final phase of my doctoral studies at Northeastern University, and I am interested in gathering stories about the college readiness of first-generation, African American college students, and how family, community and social networks influenced their college readiness.

This research project focuses on the experiences of first-generation, African American college students, specifically surrounding self-perceptions of college readiness and how they created or used community networks. The hope is that this research can be used to help colleges gain further understanding of what first-generation, African American students face when transitioning from high school to college and enable colleges to create programming and support necessary to help these students succeed.

First, I want to emphasize that all participants will remain anonymous, and that your participation is completely voluntary. If you don’t mind, I would like to review these consent forms with you before we begin.

[Review and sign NU Consent Form]

Thank you. I have a few more administrative items to discuss before we begin. Because your responses are important and I want to make sure I capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today so I can focus on our conversation. Is that okay? Also, I will have a professional to transcribe the interviews. The transcriptionist will receive the audio file labeled by a pseudonym, meaning they will never know your name in order to maintain confidentiality. Once the audio recording is transcribed, I will email you a copy for your review. Is that okay? Finally, I will forward you a copy of my overall findings soliciting your comments or corrections. Is that okay?

I have planned for this interview to last no longer than 90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. Therefore, it may be necessary for me to break in so we can push ahead and complete the line of questioning. There may also be times where I may prompt you to go deeper in your explanations. Do you have any questions before we start?

Great. Let’s get started.
Interview Questions

I am now going to ask you questions focused on the topic of the study, exploring your college readiness through your high school to college transition, and what was helpful to you during that transition. First, I’ll start off with some general questions about your high school experience, and then I’ll move into questions about your transition from high school to college, and your feelings regarding your level of college readiness. For the purposes of this interview, college readiness is defined as how your educational and personal experiences have prepared you to succeed academically in college.

1) Research shows that students who are Black and first-generation rely on the family in various ways throughout the transition from high school to college. Can you tell me a bit about your background (i.e. where you grew up, who was raised you?)

2) Research also shows that the academic preparation provided by a student’s high school plays a crucial role in whether or not a student is considered college ready. Please tell me about the high school you attended and what your academic preparation was like. What type of courses did you take? How would you describe yourself as a student then?

3) One of the traditional ways college readiness is measured is through SAT/ACT scores. You can divulge your scores if you’re comfortable, but please share what your experience was like taking the exam(s) and how you felt after completing it. How did you prepare for these exams?
   a. [If student discusses their results on exams]: do you feel as though that was an accurate measurement of your readiness for college?

Now I am going ask you a series of questions regarding your transition from high school to college.

4) Reflecting on your transition from high school to college, how did you feel during your first year at Northeastern? What part of the transition came easily, if any? What part of the transition was difficult, if any?
   a. [If difficulties are discussed]: How were you able to overcome them?

5) What resources offered by Northeastern, if any, did you rely on during your transition?

Lastly, I’m going to ask you to reflect on your own level of college readiness and how the groups I’m going to mention helped or hindered you as you prepared for college and once you arrived in college:
6) Research has shown that student who are first-generation or African American rely on their family and community networks throughout the high school to college transition. Reflecting back on your transition from high school to college, who or what inspired you to succeed? Who or what motivated you?
   a. Specifically, how did your relationship with your family aid or hinder you as you transitioned? Can you provide an example of this?
   b. Did your relationships with your classmates or peers aid or hinder you as you prepared for college and once you arrived? Please provide an example.
   c. What role did your community play in your transition? How? Please provide an example.

7) What could your high school have offered to make your transition to college smoother?

8) Reflecting on your experience in college, what could your college have offered you that would have made your transition easier?

9) What were some personal experiences you had while in high school that have helped shape who you are academically today? Can you give some examples and describe them?

10) What were some personal experiences you have had while in college that have helped shape who you are academically today? Can you give some examples and describe them?

11) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you. That concludes the interview questions.

If I need to ask any follow-up questions, which would most likely only be the case if I felt clarification was needed in regards to one of your responses, would it be ok to contact you? Would you prefer I contact you via email or telephone?

Within the next month, I will email you a word-for-word transcript of this interview. If you choose to, you can review the information and will have one week to provide me with any feedback, alterations, or corrections. Can you please confirm the email address you would like for me to email the transcripts to?

Also, I would like to send you a gift card for your participation in this research study. Can you please let me know where you would like me to mail the gift card? Great, I’ll be able to send that to you two weeks from now. Once this thesis study is complete, which will most likely be 3-6 months from now, would you like to receive an electronic copy of it?

Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study!
## Appendix D

### Sample of Codes Grouped by Category

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minds Matter</td>
<td>Sources of support</td>
<td>Multiple streams of support enabled students to have a smoother transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s Get Ready</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeter’s Leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts program</td>
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<td>Mentors</td>
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<td>Moms</td>
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<td>Counselor</td>
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<td>Church members</td>
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<td>Beam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Avery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>Sources of motivation</td>
<td>Participants were motivated by internal and external factors</td>
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<td>Wealth</td>
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<td>Cost of education</td>
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<td>Value of education</td>
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<td>Moms</td>
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<td>Me (participants themselves)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselors</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Work twice as hard”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stereotypes/statistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents don’t understand</td>
<td>Tensions adjusting to</td>
<td>When faced with obstacles or tensions, participants persevered by relying on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling bad</td>
<td>college</td>
<td>sources of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentrification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling uncomfortable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Member Check Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experiences with me on (date). I thoroughly enjoyed learning about your experience as you transitioned to Northeastern University. As we discussed, I am sending you this follow-up email so you can review the transcript of the interview for accuracy (please see attached). Please feel free to edit the transcription as necessary, as well as to offer any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections you may have had since our interview.

When you are finished, please reply to me by (date). Even if you have nothing to change or report, please send me a quick email to let me know. You can also contact me by phone at (323) 819-2141. Again, thank you for your time!

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,
Ashley L. Battle
Doctoral Candidate
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
APPENDIX F

Figures of Support by Participant

Beam

Mother

JESSICA

Let's Get Ready

Best Friend's Mother

New Urban Arts/Mentor

KENDRA

Parents

Beam
Jeter's Leaders

Ms. Smith

MARK

Mother/Brother

Beam/Mr. Avery

School counselor

Beam/Mr. Avery

LINDA

Mother

Minds Matter/Mentor