AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF A SMALL SAMPLE OF YOUNG, PELL GRANT-ELIGIBLE BLACK MALE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES IN A FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE PROGRAM AND THEIR BELIEFS ABOUT HOW IT HAS IMPACTED THEM

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Sean O’Connell

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Abstract

While college enrollments in the United States increased significantly throughout most of the 20th century, graduation rates plateaued toward the end of the century and have remained relatively flat since then. Low college graduation rates are a problem and are applicable to all students in the United States, but they are particularly low for certain student groups, among them, lower-income students and Black male students. While first-year college programs are designed to actively engage students so they persist in college and eventually graduate, it is not always clear how students perceive their experiences in these programs. This thesis is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students’ perceptions of their experiences in a first-year program and their beliefs about its impact on them. The participants in this study completed the program; thus, they exhibited a measure of success by persisting through the program for one year. Their perceptions of their experiences in the program shed light on what engaged them and what did not engage them, and provide insight into aspects of the program that are strengths, as well as areas that could be improved.

Key words: Black male college students, Pell Grant-eligible college students, lower-income students, student-engagement theory, first-year college programs, college persistence, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Dedication and Acknowledgements

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This thesis is dedicated to my children, Anna and Charlie. When I was a boy, attending my older sisters’ commencement ceremonies provided inspiration for me to go to college. I hope you are inspired by mine.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Topic

Although student access to higher education in the United States increased significantly in the twentieth century (Brint, 2006), persistence and graduation rates at colleges and universities today are low (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2014), in particular for low-income students and some students of color, among them Black males (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Increased student engagement in college can lead to better experiences among students, help them to succeed academically, and potentially lead to graduating (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2015). Moreover, some argue that first-year college programs help to increase engagement among students (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Potts & Schultz, 2008). This study aims to get a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed a first-year college program – Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program – perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them.

In its earliest days during the Colonial period, American higher education was restrictive and inaccessible to a large portion of the country’s population. Most of the most prestigious schools were located in the east, and they were populated predominantly by wealthy, White men of privileged backgrounds studying religion and classical languages (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Lucas, 2006). During the mid to late 1800’s, colleges became increasingly open to a greater number of citizens due to the Morrill Land Grant College Act of 1862, which set aside
state land to be used for more practical areas of study in higher education, such as agricultural and mechanical training (Lucas, 2006; Thelin, 2004). Furthermore, spurred on by religious and civic groups from the north after the Civil War, as well as the implementation of a second Morrill Land Act in 1890, several Black colleges were established in the late 1800’s, providing more students access to college (Lucas, 2006). Nevertheless, many Black students were blatantly denied admission to predominantly-white universities for no other reason than their race (Chesler, Lewis, & Crawfoot, 2005; Thelin, 2004), and while the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case stated that education institutions could be separate but equal, this was hardly the case, as many Black colleges received little support from state and federal governments (Lucas 2006).

For student groups traditionally underserved in higher education settings – women, persons of Jewish faith, and Black citizens – access to college slowly increased during the early 1900’s, but these groups were still subject to blatant discrimination (Lucas, 2006), for example, gaining admission to a university but being banned from living in a residence hall (Thelin, 2004). Furthermore, tuition costs, particularly at private universities, spiked during the 1930’s, putting college out of reach for many students of modest means (Thelin, 2004).

A turning point in American higher education history, however, was World War II. Enrollment in colleges accelerated quickly after the war, largely due to the GI Bill: at the start of the war, about 15% of eighteen to twenty-one year olds were enrolled in a two-year or four-year college, whereas in 1970 that percentage had more than doubled to 40% (Brint, 2006). Moreover, civil rights legislation – in particular the seminal 1954 Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas court case – as well as social justice movements among activists, helped change the composition of American colleges in the 1960’s and 1970’s, as institutions were encouraged to admit more diverse student populations (Brint, 2006; Lucas, 2006; Thelin,
However, while college enrollments increased steadily throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, graduation rates began to plateau in the 1970’s and have remained relatively flat since then (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005).

Relatively stagnant graduation rates for students in the United States is an educational issue for all students in this country, but it is particularly pertinent for low-income students and some students of color. For instance, statistics show that only 10% of people from low-income families earn a bachelor’s degree by the age of 25, whereas roughly 50% of Americans of high-income families do so (The Executive Office of the President, 2014). Similarly, students from the lowest income quartile in America have a 40% college graduation rate, while students in the top income quartile have a 72% graduation rate, a glaring 32% difference (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Furthermore, four-year graduation rates for Black men at four-year public institutions are 12% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). And while four-year graduation rates for Black men at private, nonprofit institutions indicate a more positive trend, 23%, they still trail graduation rates for White and Asian men (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Statistics such as these are concerning and deserving of attention. Therefore, this study will try to gain a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed a first-year college program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them.

**Research Problem and Deficiencies in the Evidence**

A contemporary problem in America’s education system is low college persistence and graduation rates (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2014), and these rates are especially low among low-income students and students of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds, particularly Black men (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Harper,
Some scholars have proposed that postsecondary institutions establish first-year programs as a means for providing extra support and opportunities for engagement for students (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Potts & Schultz, 2008), and some have even observed success in such programs (Montgomery, Jeff, Schlegel, & Jones, 2009; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). Still, others are concerned that there is a dearth of research in this area and therefore propose more rigorous research on the effectiveness of first-year programs be enacted (Ackerman, 1991; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005; Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006). On the topic of investigating student engagement, Kahu (2013) argues, “The use of in-depth qualitative methodologies is recommended to capture the diversity of experience, and also longitudinal work that examines the dynamic process that is student engagement” (p. 769).

With these concerns in mind, the purpose of this study is to get a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed a first-year college program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and how it has impacted them. Typically, first-year college programs are intended to engage students and make them feel more connected and invested in their learning at a given institution (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Potts & Schultz, 2008). Also, studies of first-year college programs often show that these types of programs help to increase student persistence rates between the first and second year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Foundation Year is a first-year college program that intends to effectively engage students so they have successful educational experiences. Nonetheless, it is not always clear how students in the program perceive their experiences and its impact on them, and, more specifically, no formal, scholarly study solely investigating these phenomena has ever taken place within the program. It is
important, therefore, that former Foundation Year students have the opportunity to share their thoughts regarding their experiences and engagement in the program, as well as its impact on them: Did students feel like their social, academic, and financial needs were aptly met? Did they feel supported by faculty and staff? Did they bond with their fellow classmates? Did they feel comfortable and at ease in the university setting at large? Did the program have any long-term impacts on them, whether positive, negative, or both? Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program is a stand-alone, first-year program admitting students from Boston whose academic credentials fall short of traditional admissions standards for Northeastern University, and a fundamental goal is to engage students effectively so they have positive, successful academic experiences. The key, overarching question this study asks is: how do a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black males who completed the Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them?

**Audience**

When considering who or what would benefit the most from this study, the Foundation Year program would be the most significant beneficiary, and, more specifically, the students enrolled in it. The program has worked with roughly 650 students since its inception in the summer of 2009. To date, it has changed in numerous ways, always with the intent of making the experience better and more engaging for students. Nevertheless, no one has undertaken a formal study of the program in an effort to get a better understanding of former students’ perceptions of their experiences and engagement in the program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them since completion. Thus, in an effort to improve the program for future students so they are
effectively engaged in it – Pell Grant-eligible Black male students in particular – this thesis represents a more formal, scholarly study of a small sample of its former students.

In addition, the study could benefit Northeastern University and the city of Boston. According to the university’s Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion, Northeastern has a goal of fostering “equal opportunity, affirmative action, diversity, and social justice while building a climate of inclusion on and beyond campus” (Northeastern University, 2013). Given that the Foundation Year student body is comprised predominantly of students of color and students from low-income families, all of whom are from Boston, the program intends to uphold the university’s commitment to equal opportunity and diversity. More importantly, the university desires that the students in the program have positive and engaging experiences, experiences that could presumably motivate them to stay enrolled in college, whether at Northeastern or elsewhere, and this goal of fostering engagement in college is central to the mission of Foundation Year.

Lastly, the study could also benefit other colleges and scholars who desire to improve educational outcomes for students. Many colleges and universities throughout the nation have programs that, like Foundation Year, target traditionally underrepresented student populations and provide these students with academic and social supports that could potentially lead to positive outcomes. With this in mind, this study could contribute to the ongoing conversations about college student success and ways to increase their engagement.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Coming to a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Foundation Year perceive their experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them, is significant in both national
and local contexts. Nationwide, White and wealthy students graduate at higher rates than Black and low-income students, and graduation rates among Black males are particularly low (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Locally, Boston Public School (BPS) students – the majority of whom are from low-income families and are students of color (Boston Public Schools, 2017) – enroll in college at high rates, but their persistence and graduation rates are relatively low. Among the BPS graduates from the class of 2000, only 40% of them had earned a two-year or four-year degree by the summer of 2007 (Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2008). Many of the conversations surrounding this study focused on how colleges and universities in the Boston area needed to do more to help increase college persistence and graduation rates among graduates of Boston Public Schools, and this was a central reason behind the formation of Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program. In short, these college graduation trends are worrisome and provide reason for creating better college opportunities for students from Boston, among them, young, Pell Grant-eligible Black males.

First-year college programs, Foundation Year among them, are designed with the intent of engaging students so that students succeed in college. Yet it is not always clear how students perceive their experiences and engagement in these types of programs, and this is the case for Foundation Year too. Accordingly, this study seeks a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed the Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. I work in the Foundation Year program and I am interested in gaining insights into former students’ experiences in the program as a means for thinking about how the
program can further engage and better serve its students in the future, in particular young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students.

In addition, this issue is especially pertinent locally because, as of the writing of this thesis, there are large income disparities and affordable-housing shortages in Boston (Florida, 2017; Johnston, 2016). In general, higher paying and more stable jobs typically require a two-year or four-year degree, and those who attain these degrees are able to make as much as 50% more money in their lifetimes compared to those who have earned only a high school diploma (Goldin & Katz, 2008; Jaeger & Page, 2006; Kuljatic & Kuh, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). So too, in Boston, the setting in which this study takes place, the majority of well-paying jobs require applicants to have at least a four-year college degree, and rents and home prices are among some of the highest in the nation (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2015; Florida, 2017); in 2014, the median price for a single-family home was $432,750, and the median rent was $2,400 (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2015). Among Boston’s most prominent employers are those in the areas of health care, professional and technical services, finance and insurance, government, and education; and among its fastest growing and best paying jobs are those in the STEM fields (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2015). Nevertheless, if students from Boston are unable to attain four-year degrees, jobs in these fields will not be an option, and, even worse, not earning a degree could result in one being more likely to live in poverty. A 2014 Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) report focusing on poverty revealed that the poverty rate for those without a college degree in Boston is 50%, whereas for those who hold a bachelor’s degree or higher it is just 8.8% (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2014).

Moreover, while Boston is one of the most educated cities in the United States – 44.6% of its residents aged twenty-five or older have a four-year college degree or higher (U.S. Census,
2016) – it, unfortunately, has one of the largest income gaps among its residents compared to other cities in the nation. According to Johnston (2016), Boston’s top five percent of wage earners make eighteen times as much as those in the bottom twenty percent of earners. In short, in order for most Boston residents, Foundation Year students included, to have the opportunity to get an economically stable job that can pay rent or a mortgage and support a family, a college degree will likely be necessary. If increased student engagement in the first year of college leads to better educational outcomes, and better educational outcomes lead to better job and housing opportunities, then it is certainly worthwhile to closely examine students’ perceptions of their college experiences and its impact on them. With these factors in mind, this research seeks to get a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed the Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them.

**Positionality**

I am a forty-one year-old, White, middle-income male who focused this research on Black males who were Pell Grant-eligible at the time they were enrolled in Foundation Year. It is important, therefore, for me to acknowledge my White privilege (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Landsman, 2001; Tatum, 2010), privileges that have been bestowed upon me through systemic racism that has plagued this country for generations (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Indeed, the concept of race is a social construction (Adams et al., 2010; Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012), one that was used historically in the United States as a means of Europeans systematically exploiting those perceived as non-White (Adams et al., 2010; Bell, 1992) and for colonizers to leverage their power over non-dominant populations (Patel, 2014).
Growing up, my mother and father taught me to treat others with respect, to be cognizant of differences among people, and to understand that some in our society could face unjust treatment from others for no other reason that their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, family income, etc. I feel fortunate that I was raised in this type of household. The lessons my family instilled in me as a child shaped my own social justice beliefs as a middle and high school teacher early in my career, and later as a college professor. Overall, as an educator, I have always wanted my students to succeed and have positive experiences in my classroom, and I am especially interested in helping those students who have struggled academically in their pasts or have not been granted equitable educational opportunities, as is the case with many Foundation Year students.

This, of course, does not make me immune from benefitting from a system of inequities in the United States, a system that grants me White privilege as a White, heterosexual, middle-class male. Indeed, I am a part of this system and have power and privilege in my personal life, in the context of my job, and in this research project. Some would caution that a middle-income, White male researcher working with lower-income, Black male participants perpetuates injustices and runs the risk of creating an oppressive researcher/participant dynamic (Horford & Grosland, 2013; Howard & Reynolds, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Patel, 2014). Admittedly, this is a valid criticism.

Because of this, I am conscientious of the fact that I am in a position of power and that, according to Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach (2008), I am a member of a dominant social group, a group that has “the power to define its in group norms as the standard for society as a whole” (p. 381). In addition, I am mindful not to “speak for” (Canella & Lincoln, 2013, p. 173) or claim to “know and define” (Canella & Lincoln, 2013, p. 183) my thesis’ participants. Instead, I worked
with my participants in the spirit of collaboration, allowing them to openly share their perceptions and subsequently learn from their experiences and insights (Canella & Lincoln, 2013; Christians, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). From my point of view, this collaborative work could potentially lead to improvements within the Foundation Year program so that students are more actively engaged while enrolled. Marshall and Rossman (2016) observe that “researchers are not neutral, since their ultimate purposes include advocacy and action” (p. 118). Indeed, I consider myself a scholar-practitioner, aware of historical and social circumstances that have created imbalances of power and opportunity in educational settings in the United States (Chesler, Lewis, & Crawfoot, 2005; Horford & Grosland, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Patel, 2014; Patel, 2015; Patel, 2016), and eager to use the scholarship from this thesis as a means for implementing change within the context of my everyday work (Northeastern University – Doctor of Education, 2018). Like Freire (1993) emphasized, I too believe that educators and students should “become subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and alienating intellectualism” (p. 67).

I grew up in a setting where there was never a question of if I was going to college, but rather where I was going to college. This is not necessarily the case for many of the students I work with in the Foundation Year program. My own privileges made getting a college degree seem like a given, almost an automatic next step in my educational career upon finishing high school. That said, I was conscious of the differences in life and educational experiences that could exist between me and the participants who took part in the study.

Nevertheless, I do not think that differences of race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic background should preclude collaborations between a researcher and his research participants. In fact, a scholar-practitioner who is aware of his or her White privilege can work toward
ameliorating social injustices (Bergeron, 2010). Moreover, my work with participants could have been quite beneficial precisely because we were coming from different backgrounds (Parsons, 2005). To put it another way, the opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue provides an additional and distinct path toward gaining a greater understanding of another’s experiences. Briscoe (2005) agrees with this sentiment, claiming, “The greater the number of interpretations, the fuller our understanding of others’ experiences will become” (p. 235). Briscoe (2005) urges that phenomena be viewed through many lenses – that is, studies be conducted by researchers of various backgrounds.

In addition, while conducting this study I was mindful that I was once an English instructor to those who volunteer to participate in this study. Again, in relation to the participants, I was in a position of power, as I was the instructor and they were students I once taught. Despite this power dynamic, I believe participants were honest, frank, and thoughtful when sharing their perceptions of their experiences in Foundation Year. Considering that these interviews took place after participants had already completed the program – in other words, after they’d already earned grades in the classes in which I taught them – the power dynamic was not as imbalanced in my favor as it would have been if I interviewed participants while they were enrolled in the program.

Lastly, I was conscious about my own potential biases when engaging in the research and analyzing my participants’ perspectives. I am committed to seeing Foundation Year students succeed, not only while enrolled in the program but afterward when enrolled at Northeastern University or another college or university. My research did not focus on advancing my own standing or the agenda of the Foundation Year program, but rather focused on discovering the unique nature of the phenomenon I investigated (Creswell, 2013).
Acknowledging my own biases because of my close involvement in the program is important, and as a scholar in practice I positioned my research in my own organization in order to employ scholarship toward program development, innovation, and improvement. I have worked in the program for eight plus years and have seen it change over time. With my colleagues I’ve brainstormed and analyzed what works well and what does not, and I’ve been lucky to often have the autonomy to make changes when deemed necessary. As a result of my standing and experiences as a full-time Foundation Year faculty member, I have a vested interest in gathering perspectives previously untapped and ensuring that the future of the program is informed by the students we serve, hence this thesis focusing on students who completed the program.

**Research Central Question and Sub-questions**

The central research question for this thesis is: how do a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed the Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them? Two important sub-questions are: 1) What experiences in the program did participants find engaging and why?; and 2) What experiences in the program did participants find disengaging and why?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study intended to get a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed the Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. Thus, it is appropriate that student-engagement theory provides the theoretical framework for this study. Student-engagement theory is comprised of two parts. First, it suggests that students who put time and effort into their academic work and purposeful extracurricular activities on
campus are likely to be successful in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Witt, 2005). Second, it posits that institutions have the responsibility to implement measures that effectively engage diverse student bodies (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Witt, 2005; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2015), including Black males (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2012; Harper, Berhanu, David, & McGuire, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

This study is situated in the area of student-engagement theory because first-year programs, including Foundation Year, are meant to engage students at a critical point in their college careers – the first year, where the adjustment to life in a new academic setting can be quite difficult for many students (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999) – and these programs are meant to be proactive in reaching out to students so they are fully engaged in their college experience. Similarly, the Foundation Year program was intentionally designed to engage a diverse selection of students from Boston. I, as the researcher in this thesis and a faculty member in Foundation Year, wanted to initiate a conversation and reflective process with a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Foundation Year, and learn from their perspectives of their experiences and engagement during their time in the program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them since completion.

**Background Information about Theoretical Framework**

In order to reach a firm understanding of the tenets of student-engagement theory, it is also important to consider background information related to this concept, particularly early studies that focused on attrition rates and why students drop out of college. Spady (1970) proposed a model through which the idea of students dropping out could be investigated; he likened students dropping out of school to people committing suicide, asserting that in both cases people
voluntary withdraw themselves from a particular setting. Moreover, while it was common during this time to attribute drop-out trends to students being academically unprepared for college, Spady (1970) suggested that other factors, namely students’ social interaction on campus, be examined when considering reasons for why students drop out.

Tinto’s (1975) seminal article reviewing and analyzing research on students dropping out of college complemented some of Spady’s (1970) assertions. Tinto (1975) also believed that there could be various reasons for why students drop out; that is, dropping out was not merely the culmination of students falling short of academic expectations. Moreover, Tinto (1975) proposed a distinction be made between those who are forced to leave college due to academic shortcomings, those who leave college voluntarily – again, echoing Spady’s (1970) model – and those who “stop-out,” or, put another way, those who leave school for a period of time but later return. Furthermore, Tinto (1975) argued that students’ perceptions of their experiences in college change over time, and students’ decisions to drop out are sometimes due to their own personal feelings about their comfort level at a school and sometimes due to outside, extraneous circumstances. Perhaps most significantly, readers may interpret Tinto (1975) as placing the onus on students to effectively integrate themselves on campus, arguing that those who integrate themselves most seamlessly are more likely to succeed.

Like Tinto (1975), Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) also asserted that those students who were able to integrate themselves most effectively in college were most likely to succeed. Of course, one might wonder: What is effective integration on a college campus? In addressing this question, some suggested that positive and frequent interactions between students and faculty could make students feel more integrated and satisfied in their college experience (Bean & Kuh, 1984; Pascarella 1980). Bean (1982) suggested that, among other things, students integrate
themselves and persist in college when: they see how their education will lead to employment in the future, they take part in decision-making processes on campus, and they feel a sense of loyalty to their respective college. Still others found that students who took part in extracurricular activities were well-integrated in their respective college environment (Bean & Kuh, 1984; Pascarella, 1980).

What is interesting is that in the midst of these studies in the 1970’s and early 1980’s, there was a pivot from placing the blame on students for dropping out to looking at how colleges could do a better job of retaining students. Instead of focusing on students, Chapman and Pascarella (1983) focused on institutions, discovering that four-year universities had better integrated students than two-year universities, and that four-year private universities had higher levels of student integration than four-year public universities. Equally important, the study encouraged universities to be intentional in their efforts to engage students both socially and academically (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). Similarly, in concluding that colleges could reach a better understanding of their respective students’ persistence and attrition rates based on students’ abilities to integrate themselves in their college experience, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) encouraged colleges to create interventions that could help struggling students remain enrolled and more fully immerse themselves in their academic and extracurricular endeavors. Even Tinto (1975), sometimes criticized for focusing too much on students and not taking into account environmental and institutional factors, suggested that the phenomenon of drop out be examined in different settings – for example, urban versus rural or suburban – and in different student populations – for example, students of different races.

While many of the previously referenced studies used the term “integration” to describe students actively partaking in their college experiences, later iterations of this idea used the term
“student involvement.” In fact, Astin (1999) defined student involvement theory as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518), echoing some of the main arguments of past studies on the topic (Bean & Kuh, 1984; Pascarella, 1980). What is more, Astin (1999) described an “involved student” as one who “devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students” (p. 518). And similar to some of the scholars doing work in the 1970’s and 1980’s, Astin (1999) too emphasized that institutions need to be mindful of how to best meet the needs of their students, not the other way around. In fact, he recommended that institutions be assessed based on “the degree to which they increase or reduce student involvement” (p. 529). Clearly, Astin (1999) felt that the onus was on colleges to increase the engagement levels of the students they served.

Astin’s (1999) theory of student-involvement, therefore, seems like the most logical predecessor to student-engagement theory, which reasons that the more engaged students are in their college experiences, and the more effective colleges are in making an effort to actively engage their students, the better students will perform and the more likely they will attain successful outcomes. Student-engagement theory, in part, recognizes how students who put ample time and energy into their studies and other purposeful activities on campus are more likely to succeed in college than those who do not (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Moreover, student-engagement theory is notable because it argues that it is also the institution’s responsibility to engage the increasingly diverse student groups who populate their campuses (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2015). Student-engagement theory, in short, emphasizes a mutual relationship between
students and higher education institutions in how both parties need to work effectively in order to ensure student success.

Whereas some past studies were limited in their scope based on the types of colleges and student populations they studied, some contemporary student-engagement theorists prioritize the idea that higher education’s student populations are becoming increasingly diverse; thus, colleges need to adapt to these evolving student bodies (Harper & Quaye, 2015). Indeed, statistics provided by the U.S. Department of Education prove that the traditional college-aged population is shifting in terms of demographics. Between 2000 and 2013, the largest population of 18 to 24 year olds was White, but this population decreased from 62% to 56% (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). In contrast, the Black population in this age group increased from 14% to 15%, the Hispanic population in this age group increased from 18% to 21%, the Asian population in this age group increased from 4% to 5%, and the population that self-identified as two or more races increased from 1% to 3% (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Moreover, between the years of 1990 and 2013, the largest increase of students enrolled in college in the fall semester were comprised of Hispanic and Black students, an increase of 6% to 17% and 5% to 15%, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Clearly then, these changes in student populations point to the importance of colleges being better prepared to more effectively engage students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

**Criticisms of Theoretical Framework**

Historically, students’ access to college in the United States was limited to those from privileged backgrounds, and students were regarded as being responsible for their own successes or failures; in other words, a general sink-or-swim attitude was pervasive on many college campuses (Brint, 2006). Moreover, although not explicitly critical of student-engagement
theory, early theories about college student drop out – for instance, those argued by Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) – looked specifically at students’ attitudes and attributes when considering why students leave college. In an implicit way, therefore, these theories contrasted student-engagement theory in that they did not take into consideration how college programs and personnel can play a role in whether students leave college or persist. Additionally, these studies did not explicitly examine higher education institutions created specifically to serve underrepresented minority populations and students from low-income backgrounds, as would be the case, for example, at historically Black colleges and universities (Lee, 2015) or community colleges (Brint, 2006). Because of this, the studies on drop out may have focused on homogenous institutions that served primarily White, middle-class students. This being the case, they may not have taken into account the vast diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status among students in higher education today, nor did they necessarily think critically about effective means for engaging students from these groups (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

In addition, advocates of Critical Race Theory and post-colonial theory may criticize student-engagement theory in how it focuses solely on the here and now, more specifically, the ways that colleges try to actively engage their students and the ways that students immerse themselves in their academic responsibilities. Critical Race Theory and post-colonial theory proponents might reason that student-engagement theory should be challenged because it does not consider historical and social contexts that have led to educational disparities among students based on their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Horford & Grosland, 2013; Patel, 2014; Patel 2015; Patel 2015).
In terms of more intentional critiques of student engagement endeavors, there are some who question the validity of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a survey started in 2000 that is sent to hundreds of four-year colleges every year with the intent of measuring how students “spend their time and what they gain from attending college” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). This survey is popular and viewed by many as a credible means for assessing student engagement. Yet there are those who challenge its merit and voice concerns about using the results of the survey as a rationale for making institutional and student-focused changes. For instance, Porter (2011) questions the validity of the widely-used NSSE, arguing that, among other things, it does not accurately reflect student learning, it has vague questions that can lead to misunderstandings among respondents, and it allows for students to self-report inaccurately, often portraying themselves “in a good light” (p. 69). Critics such as Porter (2011) may feel that there are other ways to reach more accurate understandings of students’ levels of engagement rather than relying on survey results.

**Rationale for Use of Theoretical Framework**

Student-engagement theory works within the context of this study because this study explores how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed the Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. Learning about students’ past experiences and levels of engagement is in keeping with part of the definition of student engagement, which is “the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 9). Also, Foundation Year was designed in a very intentional way so that students would be fully engaged in their college experience. This is in keeping with the second part of Kuh, Kinzie,
Schuh, and Whitt’s (2005) definition of engagement, which is “the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to introduce students to participate in and benefit from such activities” (p. 9). Foundation Year reflects this definition because the program tries to engage students in many ways, among them: meeting students full financial needs and paying for textbooks; providing a laptop free of charge; having students take classes as a cohort and planning cohort-wide community events; assembling a team of faculty and advisors who work solely within the program and avail themselves to meet frequently and work closely with students; encouraging students to participate in clubs and activities on campus; and designing academic courses with students’ interests and academic backgrounds in mind.

**Concluding Thoughts about Theoretical Framework**

To summarize, student-engagement theory was relevant to this study for two reasons. First, I sought to learn from former students’ perceptions of their past experiences and engagement in the Foundation Year program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. Second, I hoped to use the information generated from the study as a means for improving the program so that it better reflects, challenges, and supports the students Foundation Year enrolls in the future, especially Pell Grant-eligible Black male students.

The research methodology used for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA provides a process and approach for gathering and interpreting other people’s experiences with a particular phenomenon (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In keeping with the philosophy of IPA, this study used semi-structured interviews of five participants to glean detailed, deep, and rich data (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, 2004; Smith, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interviews attempted to solicit meaningful information from participants
based on their perceptions of their past experiences and engagement in the Foundation Year program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. Further, the information gathered, and subsequent analysis of it, could potentially lead to changes in the program that could make it more effectively engage students, particularly young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students, in future years.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Academic Supports** = Extra academic help that may come in the form of supplemental instruction tied to a particular class or tutoring in a particular academic area (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Attrition/Dropout** = “Departure from all forms of higher education prior to completion of a degree or other credential.” (Johnson, 2012).

**Black** = A person “having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa,” or one who “reported entries such as African American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian.” (U.S. Census, 2016a).

**Bridge Programs** = Programs that prepare students for college and take place in the summer between high school graduation and the fall semester of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Engagement** = “The amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to experiences and outcomes that constitute student success” and “the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to students to participate in and benefit from such activities” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 9).

**First-Year Programs** = Programs that take place in students’ first year of college and provide students with information about “how to ‘do’ college” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 243) and succeed while there.
Foundation Year Program = A first-year, one-year college program at Northeastern University intended to increase college engagement, persistence and graduation rates among students from Boston.

Low-Income = Defined by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education as: “an individual whose family’s taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2016 c).

Pell Grant-eligible = Students eligible for federal grants. The U.S. Department of Education defines the grants as such: “The Federal Pell Grant program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate and certain postbaccalaureate students to promote access to postsecondary education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016 a).

Persistence = “The progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 374).

Retention Rate = “Measures the percentage of first-time students who are seeking bachelor’s degrees who return to the institution to continue their studies the following year” (Federal Student Aid, 2015).

Summary

The problem of practice explored in this thesis is low college persistence and graduation rates (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2014), rates that are especially low among low-income students and students of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds, particularly Black men (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This thesis focuses specifically on the perceptions of experiences of a small sample of Pell Grant-
eligible Black males who completed a first-year college program, Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program. It will do so through the framework of student-engagement theory, and it will use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its research methodology. The next chapter will provide a more in-depth review of literature related to student-engagement theory, particularly as it applies to Black male college students, lower-income college students, and programs intended to engage college students.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

While higher education enrollments in the United States increased significantly during the 20th century (Brint, 2006), college graduation rates leveled off and remained relatively the same since the 1970’s (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009), and persistence and graduation rates today are considered low (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). College graduation rate disparities are worrisome for low-income students and some students of color, among them Black males (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2010, U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Moreover, at a local level, research shows that while Boston Public School (BPS) students – students who are predominantly students of color and from low-income families (Boston Public Schools, 2017) – go to college in high numbers, their persistence and graduation rates are relatively low (Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2008). A 2008 study conducted by Northeastern University’s Center for Labor Market Studies found that among the BPS graduates from the class of 2000, only 40% of them had earned a two-year or four-year degree by the summer of 2007 (Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2008). Because of these disparities, colleges nationwide and locally – Northeastern University included
– need to more effectively engage students (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2012; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Harper & Harris, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015), as research points to how increased student engagement leads to better educational outcomes (Harper & Quaye, 2015; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

This thesis focused on exploring how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. The program was intentionally designed to engage students from Boston. Just over 75% of the students are eligible for Pell Grants, meaning that they have significant financial aid need, and about 25% of the students annually enrolled in the program are Black males (M. Dugan, personal communication, January 22, 2016). Many scholars have suggested means for better engaging students in their first year of college (Forbus, Mehta, & Newbold, 2011; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012), and the Foundation Year program was created in this spirit because it was intentionally designed to engage a particular student body, first-year students from Boston. Nevertheless, it is not always clear how students perceive their experiences and engagement in the program, nor is it clear how they believe the program has impacted them.

This thesis explores and learns more about how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Foundation Year perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. At the same time, it recognizes that Black males are not a monolithic group (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2013), and therefore this thesis’ participants should not be treated as
such. It acknowledges that studies like this that focus on race can be critiqued for a variety of reasons, including the fact that race is a social construct (Adams et al., 2010; Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012), that it can perpetuate a dynamic of treating participants as “others” when their racial backgrounds differ from that of the researcher (Canella & Lincoln, 2013), and that it can represent imbalances that favor a Euro-focused, colonizer’s point of view (Patel, 2014, Patel, 2015; Patel, 2016). Further, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) warn that considering race as solely an “objective” (p. 12) concept can strip away the many complications surrounding it.

Still, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) also emphasize that race must be acknowledged, because it impacts American society, especially those considered “raced” (p. 12) people. This thesis complements this idea in that it recognizes educational disparities based on race – in this case, college graduation rates (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; The Education Trust, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014) – and seeks to hear from students whose voices have been limited and/or marginalized from educational discussions (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It also recognizes historical and social inequities (Adams et al., 2010; Bell 1992; Patel, 2016) that have limited opportunities for persons of color, and it does not buy into the myth of meritocracy (Patel, 2015; Tatum, 2010), the idea that a student is solely responsible for his or her own academic success. Instead, it recognizes that college students often benefit from an array of extra supports – for example, economic supports, socio-emotional supports, academic supports, etc. – and have better opportunities to engage and succeed in college when these types of supports are available. Moreover, it adheres to a scholar-practitioner model of using scholarship to take action and implement changes to one’s everyday environment (Northeastern University Doctor of Education, 2018) in a particular educational context.
While this section reviews literature focused on Black male students and students from low-income backgrounds, it does not intend to use the literature as a means for making general assertions that should be applied to *all* Black male students and Pell Grant-eligible students, respectively. Readers of this review should recognize the plurality within these groups and the fact that “no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity” (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012, p. 10). Moreover, readers of this review should reject essentializing – in other words, generalizing or stereotyping – the student populations being discussed (Ladson-Billings, 2013), recognizing that the studies and scholarship referenced in this thesis were conducted in specific contexts, with specific researchers and participants. As is the case with any research project, the studies here were context specific; therefore, one should realize that the referenced scholars named in this study made their recommendations based on information gathered from a sample of participants, not an entire population.

This chapter starts by reviewing literature about student populations, first focusing on Black male students, and the potential challenges some of them may face in college, as well as means for potentially engaging them. In addition, because Pell Grant-eligible students are students who have significant financial aid need, this chapter also reviews literature focusing on challenges for lower-income students – “low-income” being the common term used in education literature when describing students who are likely Pell Grant eligible – and ways to potentially engage these students. The chapter then reviews programmatic interventions that can potentially increase engagement among first-year college student populations in general, including summer-bridge programs, first-year programs, and academic supports. Finally, the chapter ends by summarizing the first two sections, and then it more explicitly ties these sections to the theory of
college student engagement and how this theory applies specifically to the Foundation Year program and the students its professors and advisors serve.

Black Male Students

Potential Challenges for Black Male Students

When addressing attrition among college students in general, seminal studies pointed to students’ overall comfort level and ability to integrate themselves within a college’s culture as the key means for students persisting in college (Bean, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1975). Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education (2016 b) show that Black men persist in and graduate from college at lower rates than their White, Latino, and Asian counterparts. Some argue that pervasive, long-standing institutional racism in the United States has contributed to social inequities for people of color (Adams et al., 2010; Bell, 1992), making them feel ostracized and potentially having a negative impact on performance in educational settings (Chesler, Lewis, Crowfoot, 2005; Horford & Grosland, 2013; Howard & Reynolds, 2013). Many scholars have described how Black men are susceptible to stereotyping, racism, and professors having low expectations of them, thus potentially increasing the likelihood that Black male students feel disengaged while in college (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper 2013; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Steele, 2010). In addition, Wood and Palmer (2015) cite studies in which Black men at predominantly White institutions perceive a lack of support, or worse, racial discrimination, thereby leading them to feel disengaged on college campuses. This can happen when those settings are populated by White educators (Ogbu, 1988) or White students (Karkouti, 2016). Similarly, some research has found that Black males may encounter difficulty when moving from a high school with a high percentage of Black students to a college that is predominantly White (Davis, 1994; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010).
A student’s sense of engagement might depend on the type of institution one attends – for instance, whether it is a liberal arts college or a masters-granting institution. Strayhorn and DeVita (2010) concluded that Black males at liberal arts colleges work less with their peers than those attending master’s institutions. The authors attributed this phenomenon to the possibility that Black males at liberal arts institutions are likely to be on campuses that are predominantly White; again, if these Black male students attended secondary schools where they were a part of the racial majority, working with White peers in college may prove to be a difficult adjustment (Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010).

In some studies, researchers have examined specific behaviors on the part of students that may lead them to have low levels of engagement. Harper (2009), though critical of studies that highlight students’ deficits and reasons for why they do not succeed in college, uses strong language when describing disengaged Black male students in one of his studies. Regarding his participants, he stated that those who were disengaged were: “spending their time doing nothing, pursuing romantic endeavors with female students, playing basketball and working out in the campus fitness center, video gaming, and working jobs to earn money for familial responsibilities and material possessions” (Harper, 2009, p. 59). Likewise, Cuyjet (2009) also attributed Black male disengagement, in part, to devoting time to intramural sports, dating women on campus, and trying to pursue non-academic activities that would help them in “achieving ‘manhood’ status” in the eyes of their fellow African American male peers (p. 17).

**Ideas for Engaging Black Males in College**

Harper, Berhanu, Davis, and McGuire (2015) reason that increasing engagement among Black men in college can be accomplished, in part, by: requiring college personnel to examine student data carefully and tie data to student outcomes; having various college personnel come
together to increase retention rates; forming college-wide committees dedicated to increasing retention rates among men of color; and offering extra supports to ethnic student organizations. Moreover, Harper (2012) argues that Black males would be better engaged and more likely to succeed in college when they experience: high expectations from parents; knowledge about college; better K-12 professionals; fewer financial barriers; summer bridge programs from high school to college; institutions that take ownership of engaging Black male students; support of ethnic organizations; settings for peer support; institutions that explicitly address racism; knowledge about masculinity issues and studies; and supportive places for Gay, Bisexual and Questioning students. Finally, Harper and Harris (2012) suggest that institutions better serve Black males by: forming student organizations that appeal to Black male issues and concerns; bringing together stakeholders from throughout a campus community; creating initiatives that focus on Black male success; designing centers and institutes that support Black males; and offering credit-bearing courses that focus on subject matters relevant to Black males interests, including the topic of how to succeed in college.

Also, Davis (1994) and Harper and Gasman (2008) call for all institutions, whether Predominantly White Institutions (PWI’s) or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s), to better support Black males so that they are further integrated and more engaged in their college experiences. According to Harper and Gasman (2008), Black males need to be encouraged by faculty, staff, and administrators to participate actively in their academic experiences so that there is a greater chance that they succeed in college. Likewise, Wood and Palmer (2015) emphasize the importance of universities establishing Black male initiatives (BMI’s) to support students, and also highlight mentors, peer and faculty interactions, and student organizations as ways to further engage Black males. Lastly, Harper (2015) calls for
institutions to train Black males in how to respond effectively to microaggressions, suggesting that Black males who are faced with a stereotypical comment or question learn how to respond by asking the microaggressor why he/she is making said assumptions and generalizations.

Wood and Palmer (2015), Brown (2009), Harper (2009), and Strayhorn (2010) argue that Black male college students immersing themselves in the wide variety of extracurricular activities available to them on a college campus is an important endeavor that can help increase engagement. Brown (2009) cites student government, intramural athletics, student union centers, peer relationships, and mentoring as being important factors that can lead to Black male engagement in college, while Harper (2009) asserts that these types of endeavors can lead to Black males fostering skills in the areas of time management, public speaking, teamwork, working with people from different cultures, and getting to know college personnel better, perhaps resulting in scholarship and internship opportunities. Finally, Strayhorn (2010) claims that taking part in extracurricular endeavors can not only increase Black male engagement, but potentially increase academic achievement as well.

The connection between secondary schools and post-secondary schools also deserves attention when considering how to promote success in college for Black males. Some claim that there needs to be more explicit emphasis on the importance of college to Black male students while they are in high school (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Garibaldi, 2007; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Furthermore, mentoring has been found to be effective in helping Black males to persist and thrive in college (Mitchell & Stewart, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015), and some argue that this mentoring could take place between college-enrolled Black males and Black males in high school (Garibaldi, 2007).
Indeed, according to some scholars, mentoring can have positive effects on Black males and potentially lead them to becoming more actively engaged and successful in their higher education academic endeavors (Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Behr, Marston, & Nelson, 2014; Seidman, 2005; Wood & Palmer, 2015; Warde, 2008; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011). At the same time, these programs should be carefully designed and well-funded (Sutton, 2009). Sutton (2009) argues that some of the most effective mentoring programs are developmental in nature, where the protégé takes an active role in setting goals and asking the respective mentor for specific advice in how to progress toward those goals, rather than creating a mentoring dynamic where the mentor simply gives unsolicited and, perhaps, highly-critical advice.

**Low-Income Students**

**Potential Challenges for Low-Income Students**

Studies find that students from low-income families are less likely to persist in college than their wealthier peers (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Johnson 2008). According to Bowen and Bok (1998), poor graduation rates are due to students’ inability to afford tuition; for when they are provided with it, they’re more likely to succeed like their wealthier peers (as cited in Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner, 2003, p. 614). Indeed, social class difference can set apart low-income students from their wealthier peers and make them feel alienated on campus, a feeling that can ultimately lead to students dropping out (Rubin, 2012). Moreover, low-income students are likely to work more hours per week than higher-income students, and these work responsibilities can lead to students “stopping out” of college in order to work, enrolling on a part-time basis, and living at home as opposed to on campus (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015, p. 237).
Unfortunately, it is unlikely that economic disparities will change in the United States without substantial interventions, as the income gap between rich and poor citizens in America paints a stark picture of inequality. In 2013, the lowest quintile of Americans earned an average salary of $11,651, while the wealthiest 5% of Americans earned an average of $322,343 (U.S. Census, 2014). Even more troubling, the average income for the lowest quintile Americans in 1990 was just $12,381, meaning that the average income for the lowest quintile of Americans actually decreased by $731 between 1990 and 2013. In contrast, the average income for the most affluent top 5% of Americans in 1990 was $239,739, which means their salaries increased by $82,604 between 1990 and 2013 (U.S. Census, 2014a). These numbers prove that within the two decades spanning the turn of the 21st century, income disparities widened as the rich got richer and the poor became poorer, and academic scholars have noted increasing income disparities in the United States over the past several decades as well (Van Arnum & Naples, 2013). Important to note too are the rates of poverty for different racial and ethnic groups in the United States: 26.2% for Blacks, 23.6% for Latinos, 12.0% for Asians, and 10.1% for Whites (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). According to the U.S. Census (2014), a disproportionate number of Black Americans live in poverty.

Low college graduation rates among low-income students could be attributed to a variety of reasons, including the fact that some of these students were not raised in environments where there were ample resources to inform them about the culture and expectations of many higher education institutions (Corrigan, 2013; Goddard, 2003; Wells, 2008). Some students from low-income backgrounds might attend secondary schools that lack economic resources and effective pre-college programs that could help them transition effectively into university settings (Sacket, Kuncel, Arneson, Cooper, & Waters, 2009), thus resulting in hardships and frustrations upon
arrival. Also, Wolniak and Engberg (2010) concluded that students from low-income families are more likely to experience violence in their secondary schools, exposure that can later undermine their experiences in the first year of college. In contrast to this conclusion, these researchers found that students from higher income communities are more likely to thrive in college due to “high quality” infrastructures in their secondary schools (Wolniak & Engberg, 2010, p. 463). In short, one might conclude that low graduation rates among lower-income students could be a result of these students growing up with fewer and less substantive educational opportunities than their wealthier peers (Lookson, 2013; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

In addition, students’ high school experiences can affect where they attend college. Swail (2000) found that students of higher socioeconomic status scored higher on admissions tests than those with low socioeconomic status; hence, one might conclude from this that those who earn high scores have a better chance of being admitted to highly selective colleges, and this deepens the chasm between high-income and low-income students. For instance, some research shows that in recent years there has been a growing disparity between enrollment rates of low-income and high-income students at the nation’s most competitive universities, universities that often have plenty of financial resources that can be marshalled in order to help students succeed. Astin & Oseguera (2004) concluded that students from high-income families and with parents with high levels of education are overrepresented at the nation’s most highly-selective institutions, while those from lower-income backgrounds are underrepresented at said institutions. Clearly, there is a lack of equity based on students’ economic backgrounds, not only as far as high school opportunity goes, but for college opportunity as well.
The issue of commuting versus living on campus is another factor that affects low-income students. Whereas many high-income residential students can enjoy the privileges of living on campus – sleeping in a dorm, eating in the dining halls, participating in the numerous on-campus extracurricular events that happen during an academic year – some lower-income students will struggle to balance their academic course requirements with expectations from home, such as work and family responsibilities, and these same lower-income students may not be able to afford to live on campus in the first place (Kezar, 2011). Paulsen and St. John (2002) found that low-income students are less likely to live on campus and attend college full time as compared to higher income students. In addition, some scholars have found that residential campuses have better student success rates because students who live on campus are more likely to have high levels of engagement, and thus have a more substantial chance of persisting and graduating (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983).

**Ideas for Engaging Low-Income Students in College**

On a broad level, in addressing the need to better engage low-income students, Kezar, Walpole, and Perna (2015) encourage higher education institutions to focus on students’ financial needs, be mindful about the needs of students who work while attending college, and focus on engaging students while they are inside their classrooms. More specifically, they advocate that institutions: 1) create first-year programs that hone in on developmental classes, use intrusive advising techniques, and create early warning interventions for students who might be at risk of failing a class or dropping out of college; 2) reduce students’ spending on school-related items, for example, textbooks, tutoring services or extracurricular activities that might require fees; 3) design learning communities where students can get to know one another and foster a supportive environment; 4) present students with community service opportunities, some
of them focusing on helping those from low-income backgrounds; and 5) educate faculty on ways to be more explicitly welcoming to students so that students do not feel intimidated about attending office hours or asking for extra help (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015).

Engle and Lynch (2011) make a similar list of suggestions for how colleges can best serve low-income students. Among them are: 1) focusing on engaging students in the first year of college; 2) tracking students’ progress closely; 3) enhancing instruction in introductory, required courses by keeping the class sizes small, using full-time faculty to teach the courses, and offering supplemental instruction opportunities; 4) creating outreach programs to low-income students at local high schools; and 5) developing a culture of success at the institution as a whole (Engle & Lynch, 2011). Moreover, Engle and Lynch (2011) recommend that institutions be cognizant in making visible the student support services that are already established and available for student use. For instance, when starting college, students need to be clearly and quickly informed about the services that can provide extra assistance, and institutions should make sure that support services are available during many times of the day so they accommodate those students who work or those students who attend evening classes (Engle & Lynch, 2011). Also, Engle and Lynch (2011) urge institutions to work at reducing the stigma attached to using student support services and make said services available to all students, so that low-income students do not feel singled out when using them.

Finally, while some studies focus on low-income students’ deficits, others proudly take an anti-deficit perspective and look at the strengths that low-income, working students bring to their college endeavors. For example, Walpole (2011) believes that students who have to work show ingenuity in balancing their job and school responsibilities. Moreover, Walpole (2011) admires students’ desire to work, and believes that those who work on campus might have a stronger
chance of being engaged in their studies and overall college experience. Likewise, McCormick, Moore, and Kuh (2010) believe that students who work on campus can be at an advantage in that they have the opportunity to develop support systems with classmates, staff, and faculty in the respective places where they work, and that their jobs in college could lead to potential job opportunities after graduating.

**Proposed Ideas for Programmatic Engagement of College Students**

The reasons for students becoming disengaged in college – young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students among them – are complex, and there is no single solution to helping students remain enrolled. There are, however, multiple best practices and suggestions for how to better engage students, and a combination of these proposals, crafted to work effectively within a particular context and in an effort to meet the needs of particular groups of students, may be helpful. This section reviews proposals about how to engage students through three primary means: bridge programs, first-year programs, and academic supports.

**Bridge Programs**

An array of college programs or measures could lead to better engagement among students, even those programs that take place in advance of the fall semester that traditionally starts many students’ college careers. In this instance, students participate in a summer bridge program, where they take either non-credited classes, credited classes, or a combination of both, and get oriented to the college campus and culture of life there. In a program of this type, students would have the opportunity to learn about study and time management skills, and get to know peers, professors, and academic support staff before the start of the fall term (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some researchers have proposed that these programs, sometimes comprised of a relatively small cohort of students and faculty, can increase peer support and a sense of
belonging (Ackermann, 1991; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). While these types of programs are considered to be beneficial to a wide range of student populations in general, they are sometimes especially pertinent to more specific student groups. In fact, some scholars have argued that programs be intentionally designed to engage first-generation college students – students who might not have prior knowledge about the norms and expectations of college life – as a means for enhancing these students’ college experiences (Forbus, Mehta, & Newbold, 2011). Indeed, studies of summer-bridge programs generally conclude that these types of programs are beneficial in helping students persist in college between their first and second years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Of course, summer-bridge programs are relatively brief, and because of this some students might not receive sufficient instruction and support during this short period of time. In this case, they may benefit from more help over a longer time span, perhaps even the entire first year of college. Thus, first-year programs might offer better support to these students.

**First-Year Programs**

Many higher education scholars and practitioners assert that the first year of college is a particularly important time for institutions to actively engage their students, as students who persist in the first year often have a better chance of remaining enrolled thereafter than students who do not (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As argued by Levitz, Noel, and Richter (1999), “Freshmen need a prevention plan. Intrusive, proactive strategies must be used to reach freshmen before the students have an opportunity to experience feelings of failure, disappointment, and confusion” (p. 39). An intentional program or class, therefore, might significantly aid students at the outset of their college journey, and like many studies on summer bridge programs, there is scholarly evidence suggesting that first-year programs aimed at engaging and retaining students help to increase student persistence between the first and second
years of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This was part of the rationale for the formation and design of the Foundation Year program. It was created with the intent of better engaging first-year students from Boston so they would have a better chance of succeeding and staying enrolled in college.

Most first-year programs are intended to help college students learn “how to ‘do’ college” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 243) and get a better sense of “institutional values and academic expectations” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 242). Unique first-year programs where students are taught in cohorts can be a key way to combat the issue of students becoming disengaged in college. This is especially true when programs are small in size, where students can bond with each other and have ample opportunities to interact with faculty and staff with whom they can develop a positive rapport (Ackerman, 1999; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). In general, programs should aim to increase student involvement on campus while also holding them to high academic expectations (Barefoot, 2000; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pan, Guo, Alikonis, & Bai, 2008). Effective programs should help students discover opportunities on campus and resources that can support them during their enrollment at a given institution (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Overall, such programs could help to make students feel more engaged and integrated in the college community (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Potts & Schultz, 2008).

**Learning communities in first-year programs.**

Another way of engaging first-year college students is to link classes together based on a common theme, thus creating a more cohesive learning community. First year students who participate in learning communities can benefit from the critical thinking they engage in when synthesizing material from different academic disciplines and cultivating a sense of community
within these cross-discipline experiences. Tinto and Goodsell (1994) purported that these classes can enhance students’ engagement in their academic work and therefore increase the likelihood that they’ll persist in college. Pike, Kuh, and McCormick (2011) argued that learning community participation led first-year students to feeling supported on campus. Further, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarized that some studies about learning communities observed higher rates of persistence among learning-community participants between their first and second year of college.

**Teaching non-cognitive skills in first-year programs.**

First-year programs and seminars can also emphasize non-academic abilities. Programs can focus on non-cognitive skills – sometimes referred to as soft skills – such as: time management; organization; resiliency; ability to resist distractions; and fluency when interacting with other members of the college community, including fellow students, professors, staff members, and administrators (Brotherton, 2001; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Tough, 2012). These programs could also teach students how to think with a metacognitive lens, that is, to think critically about the ways they think and learn (Tuckerman & Kennedy, 2011), as well as to think carefully about future career options and use these career goals as motivation to perform at a high level in their academic courses (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Van Etten, Pressley, McInerny, & Liem, 2008). By doing so, students will potentially engage and excel in both academic classes and the work place.

**Faculty and staff in first-year programs.**

Equally important, first-year programs and seminars should be staffed by people who genuinely care about the well-being of their students and who can connect with and engage them in meaningful ways (Goddard, 2003; Potts & Schultz, 2008). Some studies have found that
mentors are vitally important for student success; in other words, students feeling a close connection with someone who genuinely cares about their well-being and offers advice on how to succeed can be a critical factor in students persisting in college (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Seidman, 2005; Young, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011). In fact, in some circumstances, those who work in such programs – administrators, faculty, and staff members – can even help in the admissions process too, and this could, in turn, be beneficial to the experiences of admitted students. To put it another way, if those who work closely with the students are also aware of both the strengths and weaknesses that students typically bring with them when entering first-year programs, this foresight could potentially help in curriculum design and pedagogy, and hence provide students a greater chance of success in said programs (Muraskin, 1998; Potts & Schultz, 2008). It is vital that first-year programs and seminars develop and maintain a sense of intimacy where students and faculty get to know each other well and where students feel that college personnel genuinely care about them.

Academic Supports

In order to attain high academic standards, students must have access to high-quality academic supports. For instance, student-engagement interventions should also include extra help in academic areas, often in the areas of math and literacy, two fundamental elements of much college course work (Edmunds et al., 2010; Muraskin, 1998; Pan, Guo, Alikonis, & Bai, 2008). If it’s true that one of the most basic reasons for students disengaging and dropping out is them being academically underprepared, then colleges should work especially hard to provide students with opportunities to improve their academic skills and competencies.

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), some studies show that special academic programs aimed at helping academically underprepared students can help said students’ short
term persistence from semester to semester or from the first year of college to the second. Further, tutoring sessions are often intended to help students reach deeper understandings of their academic subjects and consequently become more independent in their learning as they move forward in their college careers (Jesper Hermann, 2014). At large universities where many students are taking notes in lecture halls filled with over a hundred classmates, tutoring services provide these students with the chance to be less passive and more actively engaged in the material at hand (Dvorak, 2004). Indeed, students who attend tutoring and supplemental academic sessions often benefit from these experiences. Oja (2012) found that students attending and engaging in these types of opportunities can increase both their GPA and class pass rates, while Bowles, McCoy, and Bates (2008) found that freshman participating in academic support offerings can increase their chances of graduating in a timely manner.

**Summary**

This thesis focuses on how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. As a result, much of the literature reviewed in this chapter focused on Black males in college, the potential challenges they may face and means for engaging them. One should acknowledge, however, that these studies were context specific, and that the studies’ findings should not be overgeneralized as if they are applicable to all Black males as a monolithic group (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Also, because the Foundation Year program works with a high percentage of students who are Pell Grant-eligible, and thus could be considered as having lower incomes, this chapter also reviewed literature focusing on challenges and engagement for low-income college students. Interesting to note, while Black male students
and low-income students are two distinct groups, and indeed are each comprised of individual students within them, respectively, who differ significantly from each other, there was some overlap in the literature, namely in how some students may perceive their respective colleges to be unwelcoming environments, and thus feel uncomfortable while enrolled (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper, 2013; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Rubin, 2012). Further, one’s family background – their financial income and knowledge of college culture – and high school experiences may leave him or her underprepared to meet the norms and expectations of higher education environments (Corrigan, 2013; Harper, 2012; Goddard, 2003; Kezar, 2011; Rubin, 2012; Sacket, Kuncel, Arneson, Cooper, & Waters, 2009; Wells, 2008; Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). These factors, therefore, could lead students to becoming disengaged from their college experiences and perhaps making the decision to drop out.

Some of the literature specific to Black male students shows that it is important to reach out to students before college so they can learn at a younger age about opportunities that could help them better engage and succeed in college (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Garibaldi, 2007; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Moreover, Black male students can be better engaged on college campuses when colleges have organizations that cater to common interests and college-wide initiatives dedicated to Black male success (Harper, 2012; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Harper & Harris, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Lastly, mentoring programs have been touted as effective means for engaging Black male students in college (Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Marston & Nelson, 2014; Mitchell & Stewart, 2012; Seidman, 2005; Warde, 2008; Wood & Palmer, 2015; Young, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011).

In terms of students from low-income backgrounds, scholars argue that designing first-year programs can help to effectively engage these students, as can intrusive advising techniques
where advisors closely monitor students’ academic progress (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015). Moreover, some research asserts that students from low-income backgrounds have better chances of engaging and succeeding in college when college staff, faculty, and administrators are mindful of the needs of students who work and put into place learning opportunities that accommodate said working students (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Walpole, 2011).

As for engaging college students as a general population, including Black male students and students from low-income backgrounds, summer-bridge programs that work with students before entering the first year (Ackerman, 1991; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and first-year programs aimed at creating a sense of community among students and informing them about the various resources available to them on campus can help to engage students (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick 2011; Potts & Schultz, 2008). College students’ engagement can also be enhanced when they take part in programs that focus on improving their academic skills (Bowles, McCoy, & Bates, 2008; Dvorak, 2004; Edmunds et. al., 2010; Jesper Hermann, 2014; Muraskin, 1998; Oja, 2012; Pan, Guo, Alikonis, & Bai, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), as well as non-cognitive skills (Brotherton, 2001; Goodman & Pacarella, 2006; Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Tough, 2012).

Still, it is important to reiterate that the proposals summarized in the preceding paragraphs are not antidotes that will solve the issue of students disengaging from their college experience. Instead, the proposals should be intentionally and carefully crafted to meet the unique needs of a specific student population or individual student. After all, even though it is essential for
colleges to make efforts to engage specific student groups, students within respective groups are pluralistic and have a variety of prior experiences and interests. Likewise, in the case of this thesis and its focus on Black male students, one must be mindful not to treat this group as a homogenous whole (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2008), but to instead recognize the diversity and nuances within.

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) define student engagement as “the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success” (p. 9) and “the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to introduce students to participate in and benefit from such activities” (p. 9). This definition is two-fold: the first part of the definition places emphasis on student actions, while the second part of the definition places emphasis on institutional actions. The proposals for better engaging students that were reviewed in this chapter place more of an emphasis on the institution for enacting change and crafting opportunities to more effectively engage students.

It is in this vein that Northeastern University’s Foundation Year was founded, as it was designed intentionally to engage the students from Boston who enroll in it. Indeed, a number of student engagement interventions used in Foundation Year echo those advocated by the scholarship reviewed in this chapter. Some of these engagement measures include: eliminating financial obstacles – for example, meeting students’ full financial aid needs, providing textbooks for free, and providing each student with a laptop free of charge; structuring classes so that students take them as a cohort and hence foster a sense of community, including a first-year experience course that emphasizes non-cognitive skills such as time management, positive study habits, metacognition and intrapersonal intelligence; developing curricula that’s socially and
culturally relevant to the lives of students; offering extra academic tutoring sessions focusing on writing and math; providing extra office hours and opportunities in which students can meet with faculty and get to know them in informal settings; and supporting students via intrusive advising and extra one-on-one meetings with advisors. Furthermore, programmatic metrics for student engagement in Foundation Year include monitoring and analyzing: student attendance and submission of work on time during the academic year; student persistence during the academic year; course pass rates during the academic year; students’ GPA’s during the academic year; and students’ college persistence rates following their one year in the Foundation Year program, if students elect to make this information available. The program is proactive in its efforts to engage the students it works with each year and continually makes changes in an effort to improve and enhance students’ experiences. In this way, it reflects Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt’s (2005) definition of engagement in how it intentionally “allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities” (p. 9) that can potentially benefit the students it serves.

Nevertheless, it’s not always clear how students who completed Foundation Year – in particular some of the young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students – perceive their experiences and engagement in the program. This an important group of participants from which to learn and thus their voices should be heard. Further, their perceptions of their experiences and engagement in a program that was designed with the intention of actively engaging them, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them, is important to those who work in the program – those who can make programmatic changes with the goal of improving students’ experiences and engagement – as well as personnel at other institutions who also take interest in these areas. In this way, a cycle is enacted, and, ideally, it leads to positive outcomes.

The methodology used in this study will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study was to get a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. In this study I used a qualitative method, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), for gathering and analyzing data. The overarching research question was: How do a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Foundation Year perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them? Two important sub-questions were: 1) What experiences in the program did participants find engaging and why?; and 2) What experiences in the program did participants find disengaging and why?

This chapter begins with background information about qualitative research and then transitions into some of the philosophical assumptions behind it. In the next section I more specifically explore the qualitative methodology being used in this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Afterward, I discuss participants, procedures, and analysis involved in the study. Finally, I conclude the chapter by addressing ethical considerations, trustworthiness, potential research biases, and limitations.

Qualitative Research Approach

This thesis used a qualitative research methodology, meaning that it was exploratory in nature and tried to elicit detailed, deep accounts of participants’ experiences within the same phenomenon, in this case, participants’ perceptions of their experiences and engagement in Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. Qualitative research focuses on exploring a particular phenomenon in a deep and detailed
manner (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005), and it has its roots in the theoretical concepts of hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation, and idiography, which means focusing on the particular (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Rather than using statistics, as is the case in most quantitative studies, qualitative researchers mine words in order to produce new meaning about topics being explored (Creswell, 2012, Ponterotto, 2005). One of the key goals for researchers employing qualitative methods, myself included, is to learn about participants’ perspectives on a certain experience, and in doing so, researchers examine the complexities that come with these varied points of view (Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Further, qualitative researchers aim to hear the voices of participants and to give value and respect to these voices, thus creating a work of integrity (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012), and this was a chief objective for this thesis.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

In the context of this study, one that explores a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students’ perceptions of their experiences and engagement in a first-year college program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them, I embraced the tenets of a constructivist paradigm, meaning I am sought to learn about my participants meaning-making experiences within a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Constructivism, according to Riegler (2012), is a research paradigm in which knowledge is created actively rather than absorbed in a passive manner. Moreover, constructivism can also be described as an interactive, meaning-making process that is conducted by both the researcher and her or his participants, and through this dynamic “deeper meaning be uncovered” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). This type of research is interpretive in nature because the researcher is trying to interpret the data gathered in an effort to make meaning from it (Creswell, 2013), and it rejects the notion that there are
singular realities, instead advocating for multiple ones (Ponterotto, 2005). Indeed, I too acknowledge that the participants brought with them varied perspectives on the phenomenon they experienced. Although the participants are framed in terms of their gender, race, and socioeconomic background, this does not mean they should be considered a homogenous population (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2013). One would expect participants to have their own individual realities rather than a common reality, and this is why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an appropriate methodology for this study.

**Methodology**

According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a form of qualitative research that focuses on “how people make sense of their major life experiences” (p.1) and is phenomenological in its aspiration to explore “experience in its own terms” (p. 1). Phenomenological-influenced studies are underpinned by the philosophies of hermeneutics and idiography. Hermeneutics, which is essentially the act of interpretation, has its foundation in interpretations of the bible, and later, interpretations of literature and historical texts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It poses questions about both the purposes of interpretation and methods used for interpretation. As for the philosophy of idiography, it emphasizes detailed and deep analysis of the particular. It focuses on how individuals perceive a particular experience within a particular context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this way, adherents to idiographic traditions focus on very specific contexts. Based on the particular phenomenon being investigated, a researcher who is faithful to the philosophy of idiography may make generalizations, but these are grounded in very specific, detailed and in-depth studies, often comprised of small, criteria-based samples (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
Because IPA is rooted in the qualitative methodology of Phenomenology, it is important to first understand some of the tenets of Phenomenology. In addressing the idea of Phenomenology, Husserl (1990) asserts, “the common element here is the method of the analysis of essences within the sphere of immediate evidence” (p. 70). In this fashion, Husserl touches upon Phenomenology as getting at the “essence” of an experience, that is, the general characteristics of an experience. In a similar way, Moustakas (1994) also touches upon the concept of research leading to the emergence of general experiences, or “essences.” He explains, “The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). One might conclude that, based on the work of Husserl (1990) and Moustakas (1994), a trademark of the phenomenological approach to qualitative research is to identify big concepts, more commonly referred to as “essences.” In short, there is a desire among Phenomenology researchers to examine people’s lived experience and to value their reality (Dowling, 2005).

One recognizes, of course, that the differences between Phenomenology and IPA are probably not binary, but instead relative to one another, as if situated on a spectrum. For instance, like in an IPA study, Moustakas (1994) claims that Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of a participant making sense of his or her experience. Put another way, researchers must pay attention to participants making sense of their experiences, as well as the processes they undergo while doing so. Subsequently, researchers must also be able to effectively understand and articulate what these experiences mean for their respective participants (Moustakas, 1994). Another seminal scholar on the topic of Phenomenology, van Manen, also bridges the gap between Phenomenology and IPA. As described by Dowling (2005), van Manen endorsed a
style of Phenomenology “located in what is termed the Dutch school, as it is a combination of
descriptive and interpretive phenomenology” (p. 138). In this fashion, one sees how van
Manen’s Phenomenology preference straddled both the traditional phenomenological approach
of describing a certain phenomenon and the IPA approach of not only describing the
phenomenon but also interpreting it. Likewise, some of Smith’s (1996) early work also
highlighted how IPA evolved from a Phenomenology foundation and the concept of “symbolic
interactionism” (p. 263). He explains, “Symbolic interactionism argues that the meanings
individuals ascribe to events should be of central concern to the social scientist but also those
meanings are only obtained through a process of interpretation” (Smith, 1996, p. 263). Once
again, like van Manen, Smith’s writing illustrates how IPA is closely embedded in the
philosophy of Phenomenology, so far as it emphasizes how individuals describe their
experiences. But it also demands that IPA researchers go beyond this and add an interpretive
layer to their analysis as well.

Like Phenomenology, IPA essentially focuses on the idea of studying experiences (Smith,
Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Nevertheless, in contrast to Phenomenology, IPA, while certainly
attempting to understand the lived experiences of people, also recognizes the nuances and
idiosyncrasies which can exist between participants’ perceptions of their experiences. In this
way, there is a greater emphasis on the experiences of individuals, not necessarily on the
experiences of a collective group or the essence of an experience (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn,
2011; Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interpretative aspect lends itself to a
very deep analysis of each individual participant, and, in the case of interviews, very specific
analysis of various aspects of the interview – words used, tone of voice, pauses and shifts in
volume, body language, and facial expressions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Smith,
considered by many to be the chief advocate for IPA, was described as wanting IPA to be both experimental in nature but also practical and in “dialogue with mainstream psychology” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 17).

As for the focus on the individual in an IPA study, this point of emphasis complements some of the frameworks of critical scholarship, particularly Critical Race Theory. For example, IPA believes in multiple realities, and that reality is dependent upon an individual’s experiences and perceptions of those experiences. Similarly, critical race theorists oppose long-held “objective” (Parker & Lynn, 2009, p. 152) beliefs and instead emphasize the subjective nature of a person’s experiences and their own individual voices, particularly for those who have been historically oppressed (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Moreover, while this study framed the participants as young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed a first-year college program in Boston, it recognizes that this is not a monolithic group (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2013) and that it is important to recognize the diversity in personal backgrounds, experiences, and points of view among these students, and seek out the rich nuances that reside between them (Howard & Reynolds, 2013). As Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) explain, “A theme of ‘naming one’s own reality’ or ‘voice’ is entrenched in the work of critical race theorists” (p. 21). Likewise, IPA scholars aim to learn about and analyze very specific, particular experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) rather than general ones.

In terms of other hallmarks of IPA as a methodology, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) contend that a “double hermeneutic” makes IPA unique in comparison to similar methodologies, Phenomenology included. They explain, “the IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 4). What this essentially means is that
there is an extra level of interpretation that is required in an IPA study, one that requires researchers to analyze how participants make sense and meaning out of their experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA researchers must be mindful of the interpretive aspects of their research. For if they simply describe their participants’ experiences within a certain phenomenon and then delineate common themes, they risk adopting Phenomenology norms rather than IPA ones.

This thesis is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Foundation Year perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. IPA was an appropriate and substantive methodology to employ because it focuses on individuals making sense of their own particular experiences within a shared phenomenon. Although Foundation Year students have commonalities to a certain degree – for example, they are all from Boston, they have all earned a high school diploma or GED, they are predominantly students of color and from lower-income families, etc. – they each have their own unique characteristics and perceptions of the world. Hence, IPA is well suited for this study.

An intended outcome from using IPA as the research methodology for this thesis was to hear directly from students about their experiences and allow their voices to be heard. Accordingly, participants were encouraged to tell their stories, and in this process they were given respect and agency (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Moreover, IPA served as a sound methodology for learning about what works well and does not work well in regards to participants’ experiences in the first-year college program the participants completed, Foundation Year. Green (2007) asserts that when examining the effectiveness of college retention and persistence programs, it is important to use “the voices of those most ultimately
connected to the program in assessment practices” (p. 42), those “voices” referring to students’ voices. Similarly, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), proponents of Critical Race Theory, argue that the voices of people of color are essential to studies that focus on educational contexts. Indeed, by employing an IPA methodology and asking students to voice their perceptions of their experiences in Foundation Year, I was trying to reach a deeper understanding of students’ nuanced understandings of this particular phenomenon.

Using IPA shaped my research questions in that they were open-ended and allowed for participants to share their own personal perspectives in a candid and thoughtful manner (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin 2012). The questions posed were meant to lead to a better and deeper understanding of participants’ perspectives of their experiences in a first-year college program (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, while many of the questions were prepared in advance, the interviews were semi-structured so that the interviewer and interviewees did not feel too restricted; ideally, semi-structured interviews foster deep conversations that yield rich, substantive data (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Because of the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, interview participants were enabled and encouraged to improvise at times, pursuing particular moments that could lead to poignant insights rather than feeling constrained by pre-planned talking points (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009).

**Participants**

The participants in this IPA study were a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Northeastern University’s Foundation Year program. These students experienced a particular phenomenon: the same first-year college program. Scholars and practitioners who focus on IPA research argue that IPA researchers should be mindful to
solicit help from participants who have a wealth of experiences with a given phenomenon (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, the selection of participants for this IPA study was purposive, meaning that the selection of participants was intentional and meant to meet a certain criteria. Although the Foundation Year program is comprised of students from different races, ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds, this study aimed to hear specifically from young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed the program. In addition, selecting students who completed the program aligns with Harper’s (2013) anti-deficit framework because it focused on participants who demonstrated a certain degree of success in college, and, presumably, were fairly engaged while there.

While this thesis used the U.S. Census (2016 a) and U.S. Department of Education (2016 b) definitions of Black as being one who considers his or her ethnic origins to be from Africa, it also acknowledges that Black males are not a monolithic group (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008), and to consider them as such would be unjust. Indeed, within the Foundation Year program there are those who, based on the U.S. Census (2016 a) and U.S. Department of Education (2016 b) definitions, might identify as Black males, but might also, given a different set of parameters, identify in more specific ways under the broad definition of Black, for example, African American, Haitian, Nigerian, or Jamaican. Although I employed the broad definition of Black for this thesis, I also respected the individual differences among the participants. I paid special attention to the individual’s perception of his experience in Foundation Year, and this is why I used IPA as the methodology. Although I examined participants’ perceptions of a shared phenomenon, I also recognized the nuanced, specific points of view each individual brought with him when reflecting on his past experience (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011; Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
Procedures

The research procedure for this study began by getting Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Northeastern University to ensure that the research endeavor met the standards for university and doctoral study research. As an initial point of “soft” outreach, I e-mailed and/or texted some students who completed Foundation Year who I thought might be eligible and interested in participating in this study. Based on who contacted me back and expressed general interest, I then followed up with an IRB-approved e-mail message that provided background information, parameters, and objectives for the study. This message also requested that if these former students were interested in participating, they needed to fill out a brief questionnaire that would clarify their gender, race, and Pell Grant eligibility, the three main criteria for the study. If a former student who completed the program was interested and fit these three criteria, we arranged an interview time and location. At this meeting for the interview, participants would sign and submit their informed consent form. At this time I also explicitly explained to participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The sample size for this study was small, comprised of five participants. As an initial outreach, I contacted about twelve former students, hoping I’d hear back from at least six of them. During the course of reaching out to participants, one potential participant said yes and maintained contact for a brief period of time; however, when I tried to arrange a time and place to meet with him for an interview, he no longer returned my messages. In another instance, an interview was conducted with a participant who believed he was a Pell Grant recipient, but on further review was discovered to not have received a Pell Grant while enrolled in Foundation Year. Although this was disappointing because this student was the source of a rich and
insightful interview, it was helpful to me as an interviewer because it took place early in the interview process and provided me with practice conducting an interview.

The interviews with the five participants featured in this thesis took place in a setting of each participant’s choosing, and all ended up situated on Northeastern University’s main campus. More specifically, the interviews took place in either the Curry Student Center or Snell Library, places with private rooms that enabled us to speak openly and get clear-sounding audio recordings. I never met with students in or near my office because I did not want there to be a significantly imbalanced power dynamic.

In terms of interview type, for this IPA study I relied on one-on-one interviews in an effort to elicit substantive information from interviewees (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These interviews were recorded using the recording device on an Apple IPhone, and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Interviews can be sound methods for gathering qualitative data (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Addressing the idea of allowing participants to tell their own stories, Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005) assert, “Participants are experts on their own experiences and can offer researchers an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings through telling their own stories in their own words, and in as much detail as possible” (p. 20). These types of interviews are of integrity, as they allow participants a sense of agency about their own experiences. Furthermore, rich interviews transpire when researchers encourage interviewees to elaborate and specify their responses to interview questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews were recorded digitally on my IPhone, which is password protected. I protected my participants’ privacy by using pseudonyms rather than their real names. Interview data was also be kept private by being stored in a password protected computer. After interviews were
completed and recorded, they were sent to a professional transcription service. I used pseudonyms for the titles of the audio files when sending them to the transcriptionist. Once transcriptions were completed, I began to read and take notes on them, starting an initial coding process based on the perceptions that participants shared in response to the interview questions I prepared. After reading through all the transcripts, I synthesized some common themes. I also listened to each audio recording in order to observe tone of voice, pauses, laughter, and serious, sincere moments. After undertaking this process, I began to excerpt quotes based on the interview questions and themes that began to emerge. By looking at these excerpted quotes, I was able to analyze them more thoughtfully, and observed similarities and differences among them, which helped in analyzing the themes more thoroughly.

**Data Analysis**

Although the process of analysis was described in general terms in the preceding section, this section will include more details about the data analysis process. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), data analysis in an IPA research project should be comprised of the following six steps: 1) reading and re-reading; 2) initial noting; 3) developing emergent themes; 4) searching for connections across emergent themes; 5) moving to the next case; and 6) looking for patterns across cases. During the first step – reading and re-reading – researchers are encouraged to take their time reading through data, and, if data collection involves interviews, listen to the recordings of said interviews. For the second step – initial noting – researchers should take notes in a variety of ways, including: descriptive noting, where researchers note ideas that they found striking or telling in the context of the research questions; linguistic noting, where researchers comment on participants’ diction, tone, pauses and patterns in speech; and conceptual noting, where researchers begin to focus on participants’ broader understandings of the issues they are
discussing (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Engaging in the third step – developing emergent themes – researchers will begin to rely more on their notes as opposed to interview transcripts, parsing their annotations for broader themes that are relevant to the phenomenon being explored. While this stage of the analysis process will continue to focus more on interpretation than description, it is important that researchers not focus on themselves, but rather on the “lived experiences of the participant” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 92). For the fourth stage – searching for connections across emergent themes – researchers can employ the following analysis techniques: abstraction, which entails looking for broad, overarching concepts in common; polarization, which means examining differences among themes; contextualization, which urges researchers to focus on particular events and situations as described by participants; numeration, which suggests that researchers quantify the number of times certain themes are touched upon in a transcript; and function, which means that researchers look at the roles and purposes that themes might serve within a transcript (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As for the fifth step – moving to the next case – researchers must make an effort to set aside their thinking about the preceding cases and make an effort to approach each new case with a clear mind, treating it as its own case rather than a continuation of those preceding it. Lastly, for the final and sixth step – looking for patterns across cases – researchers take into account all of the analyses they have completed thus far and carefully look for new patterns and relationships among them (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In addition, while immersing themselves in these six steps, IPA scholars encourage practitioners to provide a very close analysis of the data collected. Researchers must consider the importance of being respectful and mindful of the unique differences between each participant (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009),
while also highlighting some overarching themes that are present in each participant’s account (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Analysis of data should be very detailed and nuanced, examining a small number of participants’ perceptions of their experiences in a thorough manner (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Again, however, some overarching themes should also arise from the analysis. Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005) state that themes should “represent commonalities across participants’ accounts, but should also attempt to accommodate the variations within the data set” (p. 23). In essence, an IPA researcher must negotiate and analyze both individual differences and common themes that emerge from interview transcripts, and all resulting interpretations and assertions should be grounded in the transcripts themselves (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Analyzing data should be a very iterative process for IPA researchers, moving back and forth from transcripts to analysis, from big themes to more specific ones. This process also requires flexibility on the researcher’s part; he or she should approach the analysis process with an open mind and a willingness to accept new and unanticipated ideas (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As I moved forward with my research and began the process of analyzing data, I did my best to practice these IPA habits of mind.

Also, one must observe that IPA research involves the concept of a “double hermeneutic,” meaning that the researcher has to interpret participants interpreting their own experiences. It is not enough for an IPA researcher to analyze the data provided by participants; she or he must also analyze the way in which the participants try to make sense of the experiences within a
given phenomenon (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Once again, this is another aspect of IPA research that I was conscious of as my research proceeded.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethically, it is essential not to exploit those participating in a study. As a researcher, I tried to be mindful not to put my own interests ahead of my participants’ interests or harm them in any way; that is, I adhered to the Belmont Report, which requires researchers to uphold principles such as justice, respecting participants in a study, and minimizing any risk involved for participants in a study (as cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 22). This was especially pertinent due to the power dynamic between me and my participants. For one, I was their former professor, and because of this I was in a position of power relative to the participants; and secondly, I am a middle-income, White male and my participants are Black males who were eligible for Pell Grants, meaning they had significant federal financial aid needs when starting their time in the Foundation Year program. Because of these dynamics, I was cognizant of my white privilege (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Landsman, 2001; Tatum, 2010) and conscientious about treating my participants justly.

In addition, I clearly explained to my participants that this study could, ultimately, lead to improvements in the program and thus more effectively engage future students who enroll in it (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Consequently, this might have helped to get participants interested and excited to take part in the research endeavor if they wished to potentially help improve the experiences of future Foundation Year students.

Practicing reflexivity was also essential for this research undertaking. That is, I reflected on my relationship with my participants and with the overall context of the study (Creswell, 2013), maintaining critical consciousness about my culture, gender, age, class, and social status in
relation to my participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), much like my reflections on my positionality. Additionally, I acknowledged my eight years of experience working in the Foundation Year program as an English professor. As a result of this work experience, I had extensive background knowledge about the program and have built a rapport with many of my former students, some of whom were participants in this study. Admittedly, this could be a source of bias. But, at the same time, it could have lent me credibility because I have had a breadth of experiences within the program and with many of the students who completed it (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

As a researcher embracing a constructivist paradigm, I adhered to the principle that interpretations and realities are multiple rather than singular (Ponterotto, 2005). In this way, I admit that the findings presented in this thesis do not reflect a single truth, but instead an interpretation of experiences within a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), an interpretation that evolved from interactions between me and the particular participants involved in the thesis (Ponterotto, 2005). Therefore, the findings of this thesis are very context specific and should not be generalized or taken as an absolute that can be applied to other similar situations, phenomena, or participants.

**Trustworthiness**

As a researcher, I did my best to ensure that my research and writing were trustworthy, and did so through two primary means. One of the methods I employed was member checking. This involves a researcher sharing his or her data and interpretations with the participants in the study. This serves to ensure that the information is accurately and honestly presented (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013). In addition to this, for IPA studies specifically, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) promote the use of what they refer to as “Yardley’s criteria” (p. 180). This undertaking
emphasizes four key concepts: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). Using these criteria as guidelines, IPA researchers can check the quality of their own work, and I did so accordingly. Through the use of both of these methods – member checking and Yardley’s criteria – I was conscientious about my work and did my best to ensure that it was valid, credible, and of integrity.

**Potential Research Bias**

Because I work in the program that this study’s participants completed, I may be biased in favor of the program, and hence interpret participants’ perspectives in a way that shines a positive light on said program. This being the case, I tried to be as accurate and truthful as possible in my reporting and interpretations of my participants’ perspectives. I did my best to resist any potential temptations to portray myself or my colleagues in a more positive manner than the ways in which my participants described their experiences. At the same time, I was mindful not to portray my participants and their experiences in a more positive or worse light than how they truly presented themselves. I genuinely want all my students to have positive, engaging experiences in our program and to thrive afterward, but I was careful not to confuse these wishes for reality, and hence presented the research findings in an accurate and honest fashion to the best of my ability.

To reiterate, qualitative researchers should embrace the practice of reflexivity, where they recognize the contextual factors that could affect their work with participants and recognize that the dynamics between participants and them play a role in the research process (Creswell, 2013). This is something I too strived to do during this research endeavor. In a similar vein, I practiced bracketing, which means setting aside my own interests in order to focus fully on the
perspectives, ideas, and stories that my participants shared (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Practitioners of mindfulness would argue that people should be free of judgment and live in the present moment, not dwelling on yesterday or anticipating tomorrow (Niemiec, 2014). In short, I tried to approach my research with these modes of thinking.

As a researcher I embraced social justice tenets in this thesis. Like many of my colleagues, I feel that higher education is a means through which students in the United States, especially those who did not experience equitable educational opportunities in their pasts, can be given better opportunities to learn, grow, connect with others, and pursue jobs that provide personal meaning and financial stability. Along with those in the non-profit sector (The Education Trust, 2016), government (City of Boston – Office of Resilience and Racial Equity, 2017; The White House, 2016), and higher education (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015), I too desire that students have better opportunities at the post-secondary level, particularly Black male students. This thesis intended to embrace this spirit, learning from the experiences of a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students from Boston who completed a first-year college program, and, as a result, trying to improve the program and the students it serves. Nevertheless, this view also reveals some of my own biases, which is that students in the United States, despite many avenues to pursuing higher education degrees, are not given equal opportunities to pursue them. This is inherent to why I work in Foundation Year, and why I care about providing better opportunities to students in higher education.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study was that the sample size is small. Although small sample sizes are appropriate, and, in fact, encouraged for IPA studies (Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), it can still potentially lead a researcher or reading audience to draw
unsubstantiated conclusions and generalizations. Therefore, this is something that I and my reading audience must keep in mind. Further, this research is limited in that it focuses on how young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Foundation Year perceive their past experiences in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them. In other words, this study is very context specific and therefore unlikely to produce conclusions that are applicable to other contexts. The study’s conclusions should not be generalized because it focuses so specifically on individuals’ experiences within a particular phenomenon. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) implore that even when participants are sampled homogenously, they “‘represent’ a perspective, rather than a population” (p. 49). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2013) asserts, “The amount of within-group differences for any racial or ethnic group are greater than the between-group differences” (p. 41). To put it another way, one must resist making simplistic generalizations based on the research findings and recognize that they are unique to the particular participants who volunteered to take part in the study, not representations of one’s race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background (Canella & Lincoln, 2013; Cuyjet 2009; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2008).

One must also note that race is a social construct, not something that is rooted in the biology of human beings (Adams et al., 2010; Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012). This thesis acknowledges this, and also acknowledges, again, that within the participants selected for the study – young, Pell Grant-eligible Black males from Boston who completed a first-year college program – there were a variety of different backgrounds, experiences, and ways of looking at the world. These participants were not a monolithic group, and should not be treated as such (Cuyjet, 2009; Harpers & Nichols, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2013). In addition, research of this type could focus on a more specific group of students who identify as Black males, for example,
Black male students from Ghana. However, because of the relatively small sample size to choose from, and the dearth of published literature about the experiences of specific groups of Black males in higher education in the United States – for instance, the experiences of Haitian males in U.S. higher education, or the experiences of Nigerian males in U.S. higher education – this thesis used the definition of Black as being a person “having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa” (U.S. Census, 2016 a). This definition enabled the sample size to be more encompassing of the male students who completed Foundation Year, and it is also aligned with definitions provided by both the U.S. Census (2016 a) and U.S. Department of Education (2016 b), important sources of statistics used in this thesis. Nevertheless, the use of the general term Black in this study may be viewed as a limitation.

Summary

This thesis used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its research methodology. IPA is a qualitative methodology, which means that it focuses on the words of participants, rather than on numbers and statistics (Creswell, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). IPA research focuses on the specific experiences of individual participants, and it recognizes and values the nuances of an individual’s point of view (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). Researchers using IPA strive to give their participants respect and a sense of agency (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012, Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), and this was a central goal in working with the participants in this thesis, all of whom took part in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. The next chapter will explore the experiences of the five participants who took part in this study. It will briefly describe each participant and then share selected quotes and responses to interview questions, bringing to light their perceptions of their experiences in Foundation Year and their beliefs about how the program has impacted them.
CHAPTER FOUR: REPORT OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The research problem for this thesis centers on college persistence and graduation rates in the United States, which are considered by many to be low (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Disparities among college graduates based on race and income are also a concern, as a disproportionate number of low-income students and students of color, Black males among them, graduate at lower rates than many of their peers (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Some have argued that colleges need to better engage diverse student populations (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2012; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Harper & Harris, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015) and that increased student engagement yields better college outcomes (Harper & Quaye, 2015; Kuh, Cruce, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Addressing this topic of engaging college students, some scholars have argued that intentional first-year programs can be a means for doing so (Forbus, Mehta, & Newbold, 2011; Goodman & Pascarella, 2016; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). The goal of this thesis is to get a better understanding of how a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed Northeastern University’s Foundation Year perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them.

This chapter first begins with a description of the five participants who took part in this study: Tom, Deon, Malcolm, Jonathan, and Jamie. It then goes on to discuss the seven main themes that emerged from interviews with them: 1) the sense of community within the program; 2) the feeling of being “cared for” by faculty and advisors; 3) the appreciation of academic and
financial supports; 4) a sense of engagement with the content of many academic courses within Foundation Year; 5) perceptions of not fitting in outside of the Foundation Year community; 6) complicated perceptions of the racial dynamics within the program; and 7) the perception that Foundation Year made a positive impact on participants’ lives after completing the program.

Important to note too is that I work in the Foundation Year program, so I have background knowledge about the program and, to some degree, students’ experiences in it. Because of this, when discussing the seven themes, I begin each theme section by briefly giving some contextualized information. This is in a similar vein to Creswell’s (2012) description of action researchers who “engage in participatory or self-reflective research in which they turn the lens on their own educational classroom, school, or practices” (p. 586). Before exploring the seven key themes, however, I will provide some background information about each of the five interview participants, organized according to the pseudonym each respective participant chose for this study.

**Tom**

Tom is currently a sophomore at Northeastern University. Tom was born in Worcester, MA and raised in Boston by his mother. He recalled that he “always really liked school,” but that he was behind his classmates when it came to reading. Once he learned how to do it, however, he loved it and “just couldn’t stop.” Generally speaking, as a boy he liked his teachers and “loved” science and math, academic areas to which he’s still drawn. When asked about elementary and middle school, he remembered elementary school being easy but middle school being much harder. “I was challenged for the first time,” he reflected, when asked about middle school. Tom attended an “all inner-city, all-male catholic school” for middle school and later transferred to a catholic secondary school, Boston College High School, more commonly known as BC.
High. While there, he learned about Foundation Year and felt that the program’s array of wrap-around supports would be good for him; he felt that he “fit the person [Foundation Year’s] describing.” He was also interested in Foundation Year for financial reasons, feeling that the financial aid would make it a “smart option.”

**Deon**

Deon, a sophomore at the University of Massachusetts Boston, or UMass Boston for short, was born and raised in Boston, primarily by his mother. His father was deported to Jamaica when he was a young boy. His first memories of schooling were of pre-school via ABCD Boston, a local non-profit dedicated to helping lower-income city residents. He attended two different schools during his elementary school years. For middle school, he started at a public school in Boston where he described students who “don’t really value education,” a place where “it’s not cool to be smart.” Even though he remembered being able to negotiate both academics and his social life tactfully at this school (he recounts that “I was smart but I fit in with the cool kids”), he decided to take the exam to test his eligibility for one of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) exam schools, schools that are academically competitive and contingent upon students’ prior educational achievements and scores on a standardized entrance exam. Deon did well and earned acceptance to a BPS exam school, The John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science. Reflecting on his schooling as a boy growing up, Deon shared, “I was definitely like the smart kid in the class… always did my homework. There was never a day I didn’t have my homework, always answered questions, always did well on every test, MCAS, everything, always did well.”

Nevertheless, his high school performance was inconsistent. After freshman year, he said, “my whole demeanor toward school changed… it was a drag… I wanted to have fun, be cool, do
all those things… I didn’t like school… [it] was just a place to meet up with friends after a certain point in time.” Deon later regretted this period and his lackadaisical attitude toward school, saying that when he saw his high-achieving peers receive accolades for their work at the close of his senior year, he thought to himself “damn, I could have been there too.” Foundation Year appealed to him because he knew he would have few college options otherwise, based on his low high school GPA. He explained, “I didn’t graduate with an ideal GPA… so I felt like I can’t waste any more time.”

Malcolm

Malcolm is a sophomore at Northeastern University. He was born in Cambridge, MA, but moved as a child to Boston’s Hyde Park neighborhood where he was raised by his mother and father. He has fond memories of his early schooling experiences, especially “playing cards at the table, playing computer games,” but remembered things getting harder for him when he was in third or fourth grade. He recalled being in “a lot of poorly funded or not adequately supported environments in school,” one of which included “classes where teachers would be on their phones while teaching.” Beyond the lack of support from teachers, Malcolm also remembered being in class with “students that weren’t taking school serious.” While shaking his head incredulously, he recounted some early memories of school: “you won’t believe it…like students would push teachers down the stairs…I’ve seen all types of crazy, crazy experiences.”

Malcolm attended a charter school for middle school and considered it “a step in the right direction” where there was “a level of seriousness and discipline in terms of the school’s mission.” He attended a catholic school, BC High, for high school, and he described that setting as: “For once in my life I was surrounded by very serious, goal-driven students. Students from all sorts of backgrounds. I’ve been in inner city, but I went to a school where students were from
all different places.” Despite enjoying his time at BC High and growing as a student, Malcolm did not finish with a GPA or SAT scores that were likely to get him significant financial aid from the colleges to which he was accepted. At the time, he considered joining the ROTC to pay his way through college, but after hearing about Foundation Year through his guidance counselor, he thought it would be the best way to begin his college career.

**Jonathan**

Jonathan, a junior at the UMass Boston, was born in Boston and raised by his mom in Roxbury until he was nine years-old. At that time, his family moved to Chinatown. As a child, he first attended a BPS school and then later a pilot school, but for both middle school and high school he attended the South End’s Josiah Quincy Upper School. As a boy in school, Jonathan “never liked math, but always liked reading and writing.” He recalled, when asked about his feelings toward his teachers early in his life, “Surprisingly, I think I did like all my teachers.”

Transitioning from elementary school to middle school at Josiah Quincy was tough for Jonathan, as he was in a place with “new people, it was hard.” In particular, he remember it being difficult from a social standpoint: “It wasn’t even the teachers, but it was mostly just like getting to know friends because a lot of people I went to middle school with, they went to elementary school with each other.”

Fortunately, these challenges passed with time and Jonathan remembers high school in a more positive light. He recalled, “High school was good. As I got older and went to different grades, I started to know my friends.” He considered Foundation Year to be a suitable post-secondary school option for him because as high school came to a conclusion, he didn’t feel prepared for college. He shared, “Foundation Year was a good fit for me because I think coming out of high school, I didn’t have the grades I was supposed to… in order to get financial aid, get in college,
just be set. I definitely was not ready for college. So doing a one year program, an actual program to get me prepared is something I really needed. It was crucial.”

Jamie

Jamie, a Northeastern University graduate with a bachelor’s degree in computer science, was born and raised in Boston by his mother and grandmother. He lived in Roxbury, attended elementary school in Roxbury for a few years, and then attended an elementary school in Hyde Park. When asked if he liked school as a boy, Jamie responded, “Not really… I really didn’t like English.” In contrast, he was always drawn to math: “math class was like, oh, this is easy, so I enjoyed that.” Jamie’s first middle school was a BPS school that was eventually closed down due to underperformance. In reflecting on that schooling experience, he does not have positive memories: “I remember there was a fight every day without fail.” After one year, Jamie took the exam for entrance into a BPS exam school and was accepted into the John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science.

In comparison to his former school, where he remembered physical confrontations happening among students on a daily basis, Jamie remembered “the O’Bryant,” as it’s commonly known, as being much more focused on academics. He recalled an experience of being at a conference for BPS high school students that took place at the JFK Museum and Library. There, students were asked to discuss their thoughts about the MCAS (Massachusetts’ statewide standardized testing system that assesses public school students throughout the state in elementary, middle, and high school), and while students from other schools had many complaints about the difficulty of these tests, Jamie and his classmates felt differently: “our school was like, we found it easy.” Although he did not have a tremendous amount of support at home for his educational pursuits – Jamie shared that his mother, an immigrant from Haiti, worked “all the time” – he was interested
in college and learned about Foundation Year from a close family friend. Knowing that he was not graduating with a stellar high school GPA and that he’d probably get significant financial aid in the Foundation Year program, he thought, “why not?”

**Main Themes**

Seven main themes emerged from this study: 1) the sense of community within the program; 2) the feeling of being “cared for” by faculty and advisors; 3) the appreciation of academic and financial supports; 4) a sense of engagement with the content of many academic courses within Foundation Year; 5) perceptions of not fitting in outside of the Foundation Year community; 6) complicated perceptions of the racial dynamics within the program; and 7) the perception that Foundation Year made a positive impact on participants’ lives after completing the program.

**The Sense of Community Within the Program**

In general, participants in this study spoke of experiencing a strong sense of community in Foundation Year, even when, in some cases, they did not want to seek out new friends in the program. One of the notable features of Foundation Year is that it employs a cohort model, where the students take classes together, and in doing so, ideally, bond with and support each other and create a sense of community as the year progresses. Also, the cohort model, and the fact that a core of faculty and advisors work exclusively with the students in it, create an intimate educational setting where faculty and students get to know each other well. All of the interview participants in this study believed that the cohort model helped to establish a strong sense of community, therefore having a positive impact on them.

When asked about the cohort model, Tom reported, “I really liked it. It felt like a sense of community,” and as the year came to a close he remembered encouraging his fellow classmates
to “fight through” and finish.” Similarly, Jonathan also felt a sense of community in that a cohort of classmates allowed “you to get more comfortable around them.”

For some individuals, there was initial skepticism about becoming too friendly with new classmates, and hence a desire to keep to oneself. Malcolm recalled, “In the very beginning, I was just like trying to stay away from people, work toward my goals and not try to get too tied into friendships, but as time went along, I was definitely around some really good company.” The terms “company” or “good company” came up multiple times in Malcolm’s interview, showing how much he valued being around peers who he perceived as positive influences. Similar to Malcolm, Deon also felt unsure about how much he wanted to open himself up to his peers at first, as he said he already had a number of fulfilling friendships from his neighborhood and high school; nevertheless, over time he came to appreciate the cohort. He remembered how at the beginning of his time in Foundation Year he “didn’t take it seriously,” but soon after “I started taking it serious when I saw the people around me really doing everything.” In particular, Deon grew to admire one student he viewed as being both cool and conscientious about his school work. He shared: “He had a dope car. He was getting good grades but was also doing a lot of social stuff… at the same time getting stuff done… a very intelligent dude and we had a lot in common, so I was like, damn, I need to be doing what he’s doing… he definitely inspired me to take it seriously.”

In closing, participants felt that the cohort model provided them with a sense of support and community. They felt a sense of companionship because they were taking classes with other students who likely had either similar backgrounds or academic goals, or perhaps a bit of both. In Deon’s specific experience, he looked at another classmate as a role model, which helped motivate him to succeed while enrolled in the program. This is yet another positive outcome that
can result from students taking classes as a cohort; when students are with others who are working hard and doing well, it can motivate them to do the same.

**Feeling of Being “cared for” by Faculty and Advisors**

Along with having a sense of community, participants touched upon the theme of being “cared for” by their professors and advisors in Foundation Year. Indeed, this may have been a causal factor contributing to the strong sense of community. In Foundation Year, students are taught by some professors who teach solely in the program, and the classes these professors teach are math, English, and a variety of humanities or social science courses (e.g., history, sociology, philosophy, etc.). This is a hallmark of the program, as these professors and students get to know each other well due to small class sizes, ample office hours outside of class, occasional cohort-wide meetings and activities, and end-of-the-semester reviews (in-person meetings where individual students receive feedback from some or all of their professors). Generally speaking, the participants had high regard for their professors, recognizing them as people who genuinely cared and desired that students learn and grow throughout the year.

In reflecting on their professors, the participants had positive recollections. “I felt they were really caring,” said Tom, adding, “In Foundation Year, I feel like if you were slacking, the professor genuinely made an effort to figure out what was wrong and figure out how to remedy that.” Deon also appreciated the fact that professors cared about him and his academic progress. He described: “They’re on you about your work. Like if you’re not in school, they’re going to e-mail you, like, ‘hey, you haven’t been at school the past couple of days. What’s going on? You okay?’ That type of thing makes you emotionally invested whereas you don’t want to skip your class because you don’t want to dis your professor.”
Malcolm had a lot to say about his professors and how he felt they played a positive role in his growth and engagement as a Foundation Year student. He elaborated: “I think the professors played a huge role in my engagement. I could speak highly of all the professors. I felt like they understood who we were as students. I felt like they understood our struggles. They understood our strengths and weaknesses and I felt like they did their best to keep us on board. Because it’s interesting… before I started Foundation Year, I’ve had different ideas of like how professors would carry themselves just talking to other students who were in college. Some students would say that you’d be in lecture halls and feel like you’re just a number, or some students would say that their professor could care less about the student. Like, some would even say on a college campus you’re just a blank check and the school doesn’t care about how you apply your skills as long as you’re yielding money for the institution… but when I was in Foundation Year, it wasn’t farfetched to have like a personal conversation with your professors. That really gave me hope in my navigation through college. It made me feel really great about the program, so definitely, the professors were great.” Malcolm’s reflection indicates his surprise in how his professors defied his expectations – that they were more personable than the stereotypical college professor who simply allows his students to “sink or swim.” While Jonathan’s statement about his professors was far more succinct, it too echoed the beliefs of other participants: “I liked my professors a lot. They were very caring.”

Perhaps even to a greater extent than professors, advisors in Foundation Year make the students in the program feel “cared for.” Advisors play a significant and vital role the program, as they often make intimate, personal connections with students, sometime becoming privy to confidential information. Whether helping students troubleshoot difficulties related to their academic work or personal lives, the Foundation Year advisors’ philosophy of intrusive advising
means that they will be in frequent contact with students – via phone, e-mail, or text – and be, as they explicitly disclose to students at information sessions about the program, “in your business.” Participants’ opinions about their Foundation Year advisors were again very positive, as a theme of “caring” was pervasive in their perceptions of their experiences in the program.

Some participants felt that advisors were particularly helpful in very practical ways, for example, helping them create plans for completing their academic assignments or shepherding them through the various deadlines in the transfer process. Tom explained, “I felt like they were really caring and knew what they were talking about.” Tom later shared that his advisor helped him to plan his weeks out carefully so he would be able to strategize approaches for finishing his academic work on time. He remembered that his advisor would say to him, “you have to do this and these five things next week,” and that having this plan was “really nice.” Similarly, Jonathan described how his advisor helped him by “keeping [him] on track, like reminding you about your small stuff like financial aid and you need to get this form in.” And Malcolm recalled that they helped him in considering his higher education path beyond Foundation Year: “I felt like they really helped guide us in terms of interviews or college visits.”

Beyond helping students in practical ways, they also engaged students more deeply at times, discussing students’ behaviors and attitudes, and brainstorming ways in which these personal traits could be utilized or adapted in pursuing a positive college experience. Deon remembers having a heart-to-heart conversation with his advisor after a professor observed him coming to class late and doing so without seeming concerned that he’d missed important class time and was distracting his classmates when arriving tardy. In this conversation, his advisor wondered if his behavior could be perceived as “boorish” by his professor and peers. Deon recalled: “I’m like, what the hell does boorish mean, and I look it up, and I’m like, damn, I’m analyzing my behavior
and what I can do and like just coming to class like, you know, not giving a hoot about anything.” To Deon, this difficult conversation with his advisor was a turning point where he realized he needed “a change in my behavior.” In fact, from where Deon stands today, this was probably the most beneficial aspect of Foundation Year – this opportunity to have a deep conversation with his advisor, reflect on his life and his behaviors, and think about how he’d like to be perceived by others, professors among them, going forward in life. He recalled that this conversation made him say to himself, “what [do] I really want to do here?” and “man, you got to switch it up.” In the end, he remembers, “that [talk with my advisor] made me really want to focus.”

To sum, it was clear that the participants in this perceived their professors and advisors to be very supportive of them. Not only did they feel supported academically – for example, professors offering them extra help for classes or advisors helping them to develop study strategies – but perhaps more importantly, they felt that Foundation Year’s professors and advisors cared about them personally, and genuinely had their best interests at heart. In short, participants had positive perceptions of their professors and advisors because of this.

**Academic and Financial Supports**

Academic supports are a core feature of Foundation Year, as they’re often already integrated into the curriculum and thus made very transparent to students. For instance, the English composition courses are four-credit classes, where one credit is contingent upon students attending a certain number of meetings with their respective writing specialist. (Writing specialists are educators who hold master’s degrees in English or creative writing, and who specialize in working on writing assignments with Foundation Year students. In essence, it’s Foundation Year’s own, private writing center.) In a similar vein, most math classes have a
teaching assistant who is there to offer extra help to students in class, and who serves as a tutor to students outside of class. Beyond both of these resources, students can also seek other academic supports in the greater Northeastern community, whether through the writing center located in Snell Library or peer tutors who are available in the John D. O’Bryant African American Institute. Participants’ interviews in this study revealed a theme of appreciation for the various academic support systems in place during their time in Foundation Year.

Tom felt that there were ample opportunities to get help from academic supports, something that came as a pleasant surprise to him: “The availability was like, honestly, something I had never heard of before because if there wasn’t a professor, there was a tutor. If the professor wasn’t available, we got a writing specialist.” Tom also appreciated that the writing specialists were already integrated into the English curriculum. He stated, “Mandatory writing specialists meetings weighed into your grades. You had to go. I think the amount of structure made it really easy for me to give my best effort and succeed.” Similarly, Jamie also felt that his experience with writing specialists was a huge perk of being a Foundation Year student, probably one of the most impactful features of the program, considering that he didn’t see himself as a strong writer prior to Foundation Year: “I stunk at writing, so I’d go to _____ and they really helped improve my writing. I’d go to them and say this is what I want to improve on… how can I make it better? And they’d break it down with me and just go step-by-step in how to improve the writing.”

Both Malcolm and Jonathan brought up the writing specialists when asked about academic supports. Malcom shared, “I did well on papers because I would plan in advance and would work with my specialists on it.” Jonathan was also very appreciative of his writing specialist, both for academic and personal reasons, reflecting, “She helped me with all of my papers, and I
think that when you’re in a smaller environment like that, like it’s academic, but you can really talk about stuff that’s more personal if you have a personal issue.” Jonathan also mentioned math tutoring as being very helpful to him: “I’ve always had problems with math, so I would go to a math tutor before and after class, like, every single day. I worked with _____ a lot and that helped.”

Finally, like Jonathan, Deon also felt a strong personal rapport with his writing specialist, along with the fact that he felt his writing skills improved as a result of his meetings with his specialist. He revealed, “I didn’t really do the math tutoring, but the writing specialist was a super, super big help. _____ was my writing tutor, and for the first five minutes I would just be telling him about my day or what girl I wanted to talk to… we had that type of relationship.” He added, “[My writing specialist] definitely helped me polish my stuff.”

Another theme that complements participants’ appreciation of academic supports was their appreciation of financial supports. Many Foundation Year students who qualify for full Pell Grants find it difficult to turn down a year of college with no out-of-pocket costs. For many college students in general, financial aid can be a pivotal factor in the college decision-making process, but for Foundation Year students from families with lower-incomes, it can be a deal breaker. This proved to be the case for many of the participants in this study, as they admitted that full-financial aid was a key reason for enrolling in the program. Moreover, participants appreciated other financial perks in Foundation Year, such as receiving a free laptop and textbooks, factors they may not have appreciated fully until they moved on from the program.

When Tom was asked about the financial supports in the program (e.g., financial aid, free textbooks, and a free laptop), he spoke in a sincere tone, explaining the impact it had on him and his family’s life: “The fact that my mom and I didn’t have to worry about paying for college was
kind of amazing because my mom doesn’t really make any money and paying for college, she would’ve had to work like sixty hours a week and I would’ve had to work on top of that to pay for school.” Deon also appreciated the financial support, in particular the financial aid, as it was a key factor in motivating him to enroll in Foundation Year in the first place. He recounted, “You couldn’t not take advantage of this. That’s one of the reasons why I wanted to do Foundation Year, because I was anticipating it being free for me.”

The free laptops, which students can keep if they complete Foundation Year, and free books were also appreciated by other interview participants. Tom stated, “[The laptop] was a huge help and free textbooks were amazing.” Deon shared, “The laptop was a super big help because I didn’t have a computer at home. I didn’t even have the internet or Wi-Fi, so the laptop was a big help. I could bring my laptop to Dunkin’ Donuts up the street, the library, do my thing without having to come to school extra early or stay after school extra late.” Similarly, Jonathan, now in his third year of college, was also appreciative of the laptop and said he still uses it: “I think it definitely helped. I mean, I still use my laptop to this day.”

As for the free textbooks included in Foundation Year, participants believed they were a significant perk, too, especially since they had to pay for them on their own after completing the program. Deon exclaimed, “The free textbooks – now going to a school, you got to pay for textbooks – it’s definitely a big help. That shit’s crazy!” Likewise, Jonathan remarked, “I think it’s good that they provide textbooks because the year after that, you’re going into the bank and you’re saying ‘man, I got to pay for all this stuff by myself.’ It’s a rude awakening, but I think it’s good to have leeway your first year.” Jamie shared similar sentiments, and did so in a frank manner: “The free textbooks helped a lot. Textbooks are expensive as hell.”
Now almost a year out of the program, Malcom shared an appreciative perspective about the financial supports in general and their positive impact on him, describing how they were “definitely a blessing. You don’t really appreciate something sometimes until you lose it. You know, just having books paid for, or your laptop paid for. We even had a designated person that handled financial aid packages. All of those things were monumental for me.”

In closing, participants’ views about financial aid make it crystal clear how pivotal this component of the program is to students’ success in it; in fact, without the significant financial aid provided in this program, one could infer that some of the participants would not have enrolled in the program in the first place. Further, participants were very appreciative of the academic supports they received while in the program, another integral aspect of the program that can be attributed for student success. The positive relationships that participants developed with their writing specialists is also noteworthy, as these too likely contributed to the strong sense of engagement the participants experienced while they were students enrolled in the program.

**Sense of Engagement with the Content of the Academic Courses**

When sharing their perspectives of their experiences in Foundation Year, all of the participants spoke of their engagement in the content of certain academic courses. In many cases, students felt that these courses not only enabled them to hone their academic skills and study habits, but they also presented them with thought-provoking content they could often relate to, thus making the learning process more interesting and engaging to them.

Deon spoke excitedly about the content of his Foundation Year courses: “Overall, content is very relevant, which is something that I’ve been complaining about all through high school – that was my excuse for not coming to school and like, what the hell am I doing here, like why am I
learning about this and it has nothing to do with me. But coming to Foundation Year, I remember the diversity class that was with Professor ____ and Professor ____. You had to dig deep into your soul if you wanted to answer a question or raise your hand in class, you got to really think and reflect on your life and about the reading you have to do.” Other participants concurred with Deon in that they were highly engaged in their summer sociology class, which focused on diversity and inclusivity. Malcolm observed, “I think sociology over the summer was one of my favorite classes. I learned so much from it. I just loved the fact that we applied what was taught in the book to real life. We watched movies and analyzed them. We connected it to everyday life in terms of police brutality, shootings, and all types of stuff that plague the world today. So it made learning easier because it’s not just like… oh, we’re just learning from the book. It’s stuff we can relate to.” Jamie also remembered the sociology class fondly and found that it genuinely caught his interest, a perspective that’s somewhat surprising considering that Jamie’s academic strength was math as opposed to courses grounded in the humanities. Now a college graduate, he harkened back to one of the first courses he took in Foundation Year more than five years ago, describing how he liked his sociology course because “we’re talking about current things going on with the Black community… that was one of my favorite classes.”

When participants studied, discussed, and wrote about topics with which they felt a personal connection, they seemed to remember them fondly. Tom said, “The history of Boston class actually was like one of my favorite classes. I didn’t know much about Boston history but I’ve lived here for seventeen years, most of my life. So I finally go to learn about the history of how the city came to be and it was really interesting.” Along the same lines, Jonathan, who revealed in his interview that he always loved sports, spoke of an English composition course that focused on controversial issues in sports. He remembered studying and later writing a research essay
about the effects of concussions on NFL football players and the ensuing CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy) of the brain that many of them suffered from after retirement, commenting on how this issue has recently gained even greater attention than when he took this class two years ago: “I remember when we did that sports class… that was something like different… I don’t even think a lot of colleges might even have a course like that… I wrote about CTE and now it’s like a big thing.” Finally, Deon said that some of his courses’ emphasis on contemporary issues even provided him with topics of conversation he could share with strangers. In remembering a class when he was asked to write a problem/solution research paper about an issue pertinent to 21st century Boston, he revealed that he focused on gentrification and housing, recalling, “I remember I wrote about displacement, which is a real thing people have to go through… I could have a conversation with someone on the train about rising rent.”

In contrast to the high level of engagement he found in some of his Foundation Year courses, Jonathan appeared to lament some of the current classes he’s taking at his current institution: “Some of the classes I take now are just like, kind of boring.” While it’s likely that Jonathan also experienced “boring” classes in Foundation Year from time to time, his perceptions of Foundation Year classes point to how faculty are very purposeful in designing assignments they believe will appeal to their students’ interests. Conversely, when classes are not designed with the intent to catch the interests of a specific student population, they may leave some students feeling disengaged, as Jonathan experienced after moving on from Foundation Year.

Again, students in Foundation Year will also most certainly experience “boring” classes on occasion. Still, participants’ perceptions that their Foundation Year courses had interesting content speaks to the fact that faculty are intentional in crafting courses so that their students actively engage in them, and the participants in this thesis appreciated this.
Perceptions of Not Fitting in Outside of the Foundation Year Community

Because Foundation Year is a small, cohort-based program housed within the College of Professional Studies, a college that caters mostly to graduate students and/or students who take classes online or in the evening, students in the program sometimes struggle with feeling integrated with the greater Northeastern community. Not only is the university large, but students in Foundation Year are only guaranteed a single year in it. Because of this, some of them feel like they are only partially integrated into the university. Also, Black students are a minority student group on Northeastern’s predominantly-White campus, and the university has also experienced a significant increase in international student enrollment, primarily of students from Asian countries. Whereas Northeastern was once primarily a commuter school serving mostly local students from greater Boston, including neighboring Roxbury, a historically Black enclave of the city, its students now hail not only from a variety of places around the United States but the world. It comes as no surprise then that students in Foundation Year, particularly those who identify as Black, might feel like they don’t fit in on campus because of a dearth of Black students overall. These factors may have led to fraught interactions outside of the Foundation Year community, a theme that emerged in some of the participants’ interviews.

Tom spoke to this point when he shared, “I felt kind of like an outsider. I don’t know. I felt like I kind of didn’t belong at Northeastern yet... It wasn’t hard, it was just weird. It was like I go to this school but feel like I don’t at the same time. And I felt like a lot of people that go to Northeastern, like they’re not from Boston. They’re not from Mattapan or Roxbury or Dorchester... I feel like the school doesn’t represent the city very much.” Clearly, Tom wrestled with his answer to this question, as his response involved a lot of pauses and starts and stops. Moreover, his mention of the neighborhoods Mattapan, Roxbury, and Dorchester, neighborhood
with large Black populations, suggest that he did not see a plethora of Black students on
Northeastern’s campus.

Malcolm’s reflection on this question echoed Tom’s, even as he made a conscious effort to be
a part of the wider university community, something Foundation Year faculty encourage students
to do: “I was trying to be in clubs and activities and stuff, but in complete honesty, I feel like
when I was in Foundation Year we kind of felt alienated from the Northeastern community.
Northeastern is a place where there are not a lot of people of color.” To add to this, on occasion
Malcolm felt that others in the community were racially prejudiced against him and his
Foundation Year classmates. He disclosed, “They’ll look at us a little different… these are just
loud, rowdy kids, like they don’t really go here type of thing. I’ve had instances where people
would ask me, ‘oh, do you have a Husky card on you? Do you even go here?’ And I would
have to like show them like, yeah, I go here.” The exasperation in Malcolm’s voice when
revealing this suggested a sense of exhaustion on his part.

While Tom and Malcolm spoke of their time in Foundation Year, Jamie remembered how his
transition from Foundation Year into the “day school” – essentially shorthand for any of the non-
CPS colleges at Northeastern University – in his second year of college was a difficult one. He
stated, “I felt isolated at times because I was the only Black student in almost all my classes and I
was transferring into the College of Engineering. Since I was transferring into the College of
Engineering, most of the students already formed friend groups with students in their major.
Also, being the only Black student in most of my classes was a big shift from BPS [Boston
Public Schools] and FY [Foundation Year] where most of the students were Black and Hispanic,
so there was a cultural shift.” Unfortunately, fitting in with the wider university community was
not easy for Jamie.
To conclude, some of the participants in this study felt out of place on the Northeastern campus, particularly outside the confines of Foundation Year classes and activities, where they were surrounded by students with whom they shared relatively similar backgrounds. These tensions were the result of being Black students on a campus where they comprised a small portion of the overall student population. Tom’s and Jamie’s experiences point to a sense of isolation, a feeling that most likely led them to feel disengaged on occasion, and Malcolm’s experiences point to him enduring micro-aggressions by others in the campus community who viewed him and his classmates as not belonging at the university. In all of these cases, sadly, the participants were forced to question whether or not they were a part of the greater Northeastern community, and likely felt a sense of exclusion as a result.

**Complicated Perceptions of Racial Dynamics Within the Program**

Another theme from participants’ perceptions of the experiences in Foundation Year centered on their complicated feelings about the racial dynamics within the Foundation Year program, namely that the majority of students are students of color, while the majority of faculty and staff are White. Although racial differences should not prevent the development of positive student/faculty relationships in schools and colleges, it’s important for students to see reflections of themselves in their teachers and professors. Many participants in this study stated that they wished they had more faculty of color in their lives, but they also acknowledged that they felt close relationships with many of the White professors and advisors in Foundation Year. In short, participants’ perceptions of this issue were nuanced and complex.

Tom shared that there was a common perception among some peers in his cohort that a majority-White faculty may not be able to effectively connect with students, but that this outlook changed with time: “I feel like a lot of people in my cohort were like, were kind of like what can
these White professor help us with? They don’t know anything about us. Like that was a very common idea. Like as the year progressed, we were like, oh, they like actually care. This is new.” Tom reflected on how forging a non-academic connection with a professor via small talk before or after class could help make students feel more connected. He also argued that professors don’t have to have *everything* in common with students, but if they have at least one thing, it can help to form a bond. He remembered a specific example about bonding over basketball with a particular professor, sharing, “You don’t need everything; you just need, like one thing… like the basketball talk; it was like, he likes basketball!” When asked about what he thinks would be the benefit of having more faculty of color in Foundation Year, Tom stated, “I feel like if you’re trying to draw kids in, at first it might help. But I think as a whole, it really wouldn’t change a whole lot except for that first, pulling kids in.”

Malcolm also acknowledged that this was a frustrating phenomenon that he and his classmates took noted. Yet similar to Tom, he also thought that Foundation Year faculty were still able to forge positive connections with their students. Speaking deliberately and thoughtfully, he explained, “It’s definitely something that we think about as students. Every college kind of yields the same thing. You know at Northeastern it’s the same way. There’s not really a lot of professors or faculty members of color. I just felt like the difference was, like I mentioned before, you guys understood the students you had.”

While Tom and Malcolm seemed to find it striking that there were not more professors of color on the Foundation Year staff, Jamie and Deon seemed resigned to this as a norm with which they were accustomed. Nevertheless, their plans for future careers revealed they want to do something to change this. Jamie commented, “I don’t really think about it much, just because that was the same thing in high school, middle school, elementary school… most were White. I
had four Black teachers in my life… in college, I don’t think I had any.” Jamie, who plans to earn a master’s degree in education so he can become a licensed high school math teacher, was explicit in stating that part of his interest in teaching is because he knows that students of color can benefit from working with teachers of color. In preparing for an application and interview for a teachers’ preparation program, Jamie said he read a study that found Black students “do much better and they’re less likely to drop out because they had at least one Black teacher in their life.” Moreover, Jamie’s revelation that he had a hard time at Northeastern after Foundation Year, largely because he found himself the sole Black student in many of his computer engineering courses and never had a Black professor in any class at the university, could also provide reason for why he’s interested in teaching and connecting with students from similar backgrounds as his own.

Deon also conceded that a lack of faculty of color in a program like Foundation Year is problematic; about this trend, he admitted, “I know it’s an issue, like not having people look like you if you’re a student of color.” Yet he also felt strongly that this phenomenon does not have a significant impact on him: “I don’t care. I would say for me personally, like that’s been my school experience all my life, so it’s like, I don’t really take it… I don’t take it that far, like we’re both, I don’t know, this sounds cliché, but like we’re both people… who really cares?” In fact, in Deon’s case he seemed to take pride in bridging any cultural barriers that may exist, for example, between a young, Black male student and an older, White male professor. Remembering his casual, close relationship with his writing specialist, he observed, “Even though he’s a different race, I could still connect with him.” On commenting about another male, middle-aged professor and the fact that they’d commonly do a fist bump when seeing each other in passing around campus or saying goodbye at the end of a class, he described, “we got
this physical thing… it’s like this thing we have.” And in reflecting on another, more senior professor in Foundation Year, he pointed out that when he offered a fist bump, this professor would instead wrap his whole hand around Deon’s fist, as if he were shanking his hand, and then smile. Whereas this connection seemed somewhat awkward compared to the other, it was still a connection, and Deon noted the humor that both he and the professor shared in this interaction. He described, “We’d just laugh about it… it’s a cultural thing… I’m doing this and that’s not really what [this professor] does.”

Deon, in particular, appeared to grapple with the phenomenon of being a Black student in a White professor’s class, and how he usually managed to stay true to his own style of speech while simultaneously connecting to professors in a more formal manner at times. He first started by mentioning a Black teacher in high school who reminded him of his mother. He hypothesized, “She probably grew up like my mother grew up, like my family grew up… but it doesn’t really make a difference… she was still annoying like every other teacher… she was still on your back like every other teacher. But I could joke around with her… I could say, ‘Yo! Ms. _____!’.” Deon’s use of the words “yo” here suggests an informal rapport he had with this teacher that he might not share with other faculty members, perhaps White faculty members in particular.

Still, when he thought about it some more, he explained that his speaking style typically stays the same, even when working with White professors: “With other professors or teachers who aren’t Black, even though I had my slang, I could still talk to them… I could say, ‘I’m not really feeling you,’ I could still just talk slang. I still do speak this way, like this colloquial way around professors.” Indeed, Deon even posited that staying true to his everyday style of speaking probably suggested that he’d reached a certain comfort level around a White professor. He
elaborated, “I would swear, and I won’t notice I’m swearing but like I don’t know, even if they’re White, Black, like I would still say a swear word by accident and it’s not like I’m saying it with ‘oomph’ or force… [it’s] just how I talk… it’s like when I’m comfortable… me speaking comfortably around a White professor should indicate that there’s really no problem.”

Despite Deon’s belief that there shouldn’t be any reason for Black students and White professors to be estranged from each other – that there’s ample evidence in his own lived experiences that sincere connections can be made despite racial differences – his interest in pursuing a career in the field of education proves that he does yearn to connect with young people like himself. When asked about career interests, he described, “As a child, I’ve had like, I don’t want to say traumatic, but like really tough experiences and I’ve always reflected… even by myself… thought consciously about the decisions that I made going forward, what is this going to mean for me, how is it going to affect me, things like that. So even if it’s a guidance counselor or a Big Brother, anything like around inner-city kids who maybe have gone through some of the same things that I have. I feel like if I’m doing these types of things, it won’t be work.” Deon’s use of the term “inner-city” suggests that he’s speaking of young, urban, students of color from similar backgrounds as his own. And his use of the phrase “it won’t be work” suggests that he feels he’ll be able to naturally connect with these students, and ideally serve as role model for them.

In closing, participants lamented the fact that they had not worked with more teachers and professors of color during their educational experiences, and they noted this too when they started the Foundation Year program. However, they also acknowledged that with the passage of time, they came to foster positive relationships with their White professors and advisors. At least two of the participants mentioned a desire to go into the field of education, and a key reason for
doing so was their desire to serve as a role model to other students of color like themselves, to fill that void that they felt during their own educational experiences.

The Perception that Foundation Year Made a Positive Impact after Completion

Despite some negative experiences during their time in Foundation Year – for example, experiences with racism outside of the program and racial tensions within it – participants felt the program made a positive impact on them moving forward in their lives. Perhaps because the experiences of racism and feeling like an outsider happened outside the confines of the program, participants did not associate it directly with the program, and were able to see its positive aspects instead. So too, because participants reported mostly positive experiences with faculty and advisors within the program, the racial tensions that they may have felt with a majority-White faculty may not have been as prevalent as they otherwise could have been if their faculty interactions were largely negative. Participants perceived the positive impacts of the program in a number of ways. Thus, this theme is analyzed more specifically into six sub-themes: 1) growth in writing; 2) exposure to academic and career interests; 3) development of study habits; 4) advancing forward in college; 5) comfort with asking questions; and 6) encouraging self-reflection.

Growth in Writing

Tom explained that he became a better writer, in large part, because his writing specialist always posed the question “why?,” which helped him expand and further develop his written ideas. Deon also felt that his academic skills, specifically writing, improved as a result of his time in Foundation Year. He felt that his work with the writing specialists and his use of writing resources, such as templates for “how to write and analyze a quote,” helped him moving forward in college. “It prepared me for this year at UMass Boston, most definitely,” he reflected. Like
Tom and Deon, Jamie also mentioned that writing was something that came to mind when thinking of how Foundation Year impacted him in a positive manner. Although he was not asked to write many essays after Foundation Year because he studied computer engineering, he shared that his time in Foundation Year and work his work with his writing specialist “definitely helped my writing skills.”

**Exposure to Academic and Career Interests**

Tom revealed that his selection of a college major was aided by Foundation Year. He shared, “I was interested in business in general, but I think in Foundation Year they made us look into other majors. So I got to see what I wanted to do and finance and marketing really spoke to me.” For Jamie, his experiences with the Foundation Year program after he completed it, in his role as a math tutor, were pivotal in his decision to pursue a career in education. He explained, “One of the reasons I made a career switch from engineering to education [was] because of Foundation Year… I was tutoring for five years, so I really enjoyed it every year… getting to know students and seeing how their math skills are improving from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.”

**Development of Study Habits**

As a result of learning about positive study habits, in particular getting his work done in advance of due dates, Tom felt he improved as a student. He stated, “I used to put things off until the last minute and I’ll still do that occasionally now, but I’ll try to get ahead when I have free time and it’s like I’m a lot less lazy that I used to be.” Deon also felt good about his study habits, namely his ability to resist distractions in his social life. He said he took pride spending a lot of time in the college library getting work done and “seeing those habits kind of rub off on me, because now at UMass, when my boys hit me up, ‘you want to chill, you want to do this’…”
I’m like, ‘no bro, I’m at school right now.’” Like Tom and Deon, Malcolm also felt that his study habits improved, namely in the form of time management. He revealed, “The program helped me manage my time more.”

**Advancing Forward in College**

Jonathan also felt that he benefited from his time in Foundation Year, especially in light of how well he’s advanced in his studies at UMass Boston, as he’s on track to graduate early. He stated, “Foundation Year actually put me ahead of where I’m supposed to be” and “I think it gave me a rock-solid foundation – academically, socially… I always think, where would I be without Foundation Year?” While keeping in mind that Foundation Year helped him keep his sights on, as he put it, “the big picture,” which is graduating from college, Jonathan also recalled some of the practical lessons he learned in Foundation Year that impacted him going forward. He reminisced, “I remember my first semester at UMass, my teacher yelled at the whole class because a lot of people, they’re not [checking] e-mail. And that was something I learned in Foundation Year, so it was something I didn’t have to worry about.” Similar to Jonathan, Malcolm also felt that Foundation Year helped him as he advance forward in college. He saw it as a significant bridge to him being at Northeastern today and continuing to do well in his subsequent classes. He elaborated, “It was definitely a great stepping stone for me to be where I’m at today. I learned a lot fast, but at the same time, the things I learned are the tools I use to navigate myself here at school. Having the resources that I had in Foundation Year helped me, and it’s still helping me, and that’s the best part.”

**Comfort with Asking Questions**

For Jamie, a deep-voiced student who is laid-back and rarely vying for attention from others, the program helped make him more comfortable speaking up and asking questions. He realized
that asking for help is okay and often necessary in order to succeed in college, explaining, “I just learned to ask for help and I don’t care if anyone hates me.” While this reflection was verbalized solely by Jamie, it was important to include as a sub-theme, as comfort with asking questions can be an integral part of college success.

**Encouraging Self-Reflection**

Most noteworthy for Deon, he viewed Foundation Year as an experience that made him reflect thoughtfully on his life. He disclosed a personal matter that happened prior to Foundation Year, which could have resulted in him being arrested and missing the opportunity to begin college immediately after completing high school. He described, “Before Foundation Year, like going in, I had an experience when I could have not gone to college, like I could have gotten arrested, not have any financial aid which would make me not go to college or I’ll have to pay for it out of pocket. So having that wake-up call and then going to Foundation Year, like having the experiences where I have to reflect on myself and look at myself, like I developed a habit of doing that…” Deon mentioned how one-on-one conversations with his advisors helped him to reflect on himself, and how in doing so he felt he benefitted. While only Deon was explicit in addressing this sub-theme of self-reflection, it was important to include here, as self-reflection and thinking meta-cognitively can help college students further engage in their studies and achieve success.

**Summary**

Although the participants in this study admitted to experiencing some racial tensions within Foundation Year, and, more significantly, outside the confines of the program, most of their perceptions of their time in the program were positive. They felt they: bonded with fellow classmates, were supported by advisors and professors, appreciated the academic and financial
supports, and engaged in the content of their courses. They also stated that the program made a positive, lasting impact on them in that it: helped with their writing, exposed them to academic and career opportunities, improved their study habits, helped advance them forward in college, made them more comfortable asking questions, and encouraged self-reflection. In essence, their perceptions were largely positive, and participants expressed a sense of fondness and gratitude toward the program and those who work in it.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Reiteration of research question and theoretical lens

The fundamental research question for this thesis was: how do a small sample of young, Pell Grant-eligible Black male students who completed the Foundation Year program perceive their past experiences and engagement in said program, and their beliefs about how it has impacted them? Two important sub-questions were: 1) What experiences in the program did participants find engaging and why?; and 2) What experiences in the program did participants find disengaging and why? This study used a qualitative approach, more specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to gathering data about participants’ perceptions of their experiences in Foundation Year and its impact on them. I used this methodology in order to focus on participants’ experiences of a phenomenon in a deep and detailed manner (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), and to give value and respect to the voices of said participants (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Moreover, because this study focused on participants who completed Foundation Year, to some degree it reflects Harper’s (2013) anti-deficit framework in that it examines the perceptions of students who were successful in said program.
Overall, participants in this thesis had mostly positive perceptions of their experiences in Foundation Year. There was an overarching theme of participants feeling “cared about” or “cared for” during their time in the program, and they appreciated the various supports – for example, financial aid, tutoring, frequent opportunities to meet with faculty and advisors, curricula tailored to their interests, etc. – available to them. Participants also felt that their experiences in the program helped to prepare them for the next steps of their college journeys, whether it was an improvement in study skills, learning about career paths, learning how to interact with peers and professors, or learning about themselves and how they might be perceived by others in an academic context.

The theoretical framework for this thesis was student-engagement theory, a theory that is twofold. First, it asserts that students who apply focused time and effort into their academic work and purposeful extracurricular activities on campus are likely to be successful in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Second, it argues that institutions are responsible for actively engaging diverse student bodies (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2015), including Black males (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2012; Harper, Berhanu, David, & McGuire, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Based on these seminal tenets of student-engagement theory, this thesis found that participants were generally engaged during their time in Foundation Year and found it to be a positive experience overall. This study focused on interviews with five students who fit the criteria of being Pell Grant-eligible Black males who completed Foundation Year. One was a graduate of Northeastern University, two were second year students at Northeastern University, one was a third year student at UMass Boston, and one was a second year student at UMass Boston. These participants were engaged by the curricula that catered to their interests, the fact
that they took classes as a cohort, the sense of a “caring” relationship they felt they had with professors and advisors, the financial supports provided to them, and the tutoring services provided to them. The participants in this study were also, presumably, engaged in putting in hard work themselves, as they all had demonstrated strong performance in the areas of attendance, submission of assigned work, and course grades. Moreover, they all persisted from their first year of college to their second.

Still, not all of the participants actively engaged in extracurricular activities on campus, one of two key factors in creating strong student engagement, as defined by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Witt (2005). In a follow-up e-mail question posed to participants after they each completed their in-person interviews, I asked participants if they engaged in extracurricular activities while in Foundation Year, and, if so, which types? Among the four of five participants who responded to this e-mail question, all of them said that they did not participate in extracurricular activities while enrolled in Foundation Year. In this way, there was a slight departure from literature pertaining to student-engagement theory.

Overall, there were seven central themes that emerged from this study: 1) the sense of community within the program; 2) the feeling of being “cared for” by faculty and advisors; 3) the appreciation of academic and financial supports; 4) a sense of engagement with the content of many academic courses within Foundation Year; 5) perceptions of not fitting in outside of the Foundation Year community; 6) complicated perceptions of the racial dynamics within the program; and 7) the perception that Foundation Year made a positive impact on participants’ lives after completing the program.

**Literature about first-year programs**
To get into more specific aspects of this study and how it relates to student engagement, one can first observe connections to published literature on first-year college programs. Some researchers have argued that deliberately-designed first-year college programs can provide extra support and opportunities for further engaging students (Kuh, Cruse, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Potts & Schultz, 2008), and indeed, this thesis has validated these assertions, as all of the participants recounted various positive experiences within the Foundation Year program that helped to engage them during their time enrolled in it. Furthermore, some researchers have argued that first-year programs yield successful outcomes among students (Montgomery, Jeff, Schlegel, & Jones, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009), and if success in this study is measured, for instance, in student retention – that is, students returning for a second year of college immediately after completing their first year – this argument also holds true, as all of the participants interviewed in this study returned for a second year of college after completing their first year.

Student-engagement proponents argue that small first-year programs, especially, lead to stronger relationships between students and staff (Ackerman, 1999; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012), and this seems to have held true based on the perspectives of the participants, who all had positive things to say about faculty members and advisors in Foundation Year. Tom and Deon mentioned that if students were “slacking” or “not in school,” respectively, faculty would make an effort to reach out to them to help, and they appreciated this. Malcolm stated that the help he got from his professors and advisors made him feel “great about the program,” and Jonathan said simply, “I liked my professors a lot. They were very caring.” Goddard (2003) and Potts and Schultz (2008) argue that first-year programs must be staffed by faculty who genuinely care about students and make a conscious effort to connect and engage with them, and the feedback
from the participants in this study reflect a Foundation Year staff who fit this mold. Faculty who work in a first-year program consistently – as is the case with the core faculty and advisors in Foundation Year, who work almost exclusively within the program – can have a better sense of the academic strengths and weaknesses of students entering a program (Muraskin, 1998; Potts & Schultz, 2008), and this was echoed in Malcom’s reflection that his Foundation Year professors knew him and his classmates better than the subsequent professors he worked with in his second year of college.

Some first-year programs are also championed by education researchers because they help students to get a better understanding of college expectations and how to adapt to them accordingly (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), and the participants seemed to confer this notion as well. For example, as a result of Foundation Year, Malcolm spoke about learning how to manage his time better, Tom spoke about learning how to approach his school work responsibilities on a week to week basis, Deon spoke about the thoughtful conversations he had with his advisor and how this made him want to be perceived by his professors as a more serious student, and Jonathan mentioned that it gave him the knowledge of how to communicate with a professor in a formal manner via e-mail, something with which some of his fellow UMass Boston classmates struggled.

Tinto and Goodsell (1994), Pike, Kuh, and McCormick (2011), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) wrote about how learning communities can be beneficial to students. Tinto and Goodsell (1994) argued that learning communities help students to further engage in academic work, and this seemed true based on the perspectives of the interview participants for this study, who liked taking class in a cohort model, feeling comfortable being with peers from similar backgrounds as themselves and sometimes even getting motivated by hard working peers in the cohort. Deon’s
admiration of a classmate he considered an “intelligent dude” attests to this, as did Tom’s revelation that the cohort provided a “sense of community.” Learning communities, according to Pike, Kuh, and McCormick (2011), make students feel supported on college campuses, and this was also a common theme in participants reflections on their time spent in Foundation Year – the idea that there were numerous supports in place for them and the other members of their cohort. Finally, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) purported that learning communities can lead to better persistence rates between the first and second year of college, and this was proved true based on this study’s participants, each of whom persisted from the first to second year of college.

First-year programs have also been found to help students in their interactions with other students, professors, staff members, and administrators (Brotherton, 2001, Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Porche, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010; Potts & Schultz, 2010; Tough, 2012). While the participants in this study did not explicitly mention having many interactions with staff and administration outside of Foundation Year or necessarily having positive ones when they did so – recall that Tom and Malcolm both felt somewhat like outsiders when in certain non-Foundation Year settings on campus, as did Jamie during his time at Northeastern after completing Foundation Year – they did report having positive perspectives on most of their interactions with classmates, professors, and advisors within the program. In other instances, researchers have pointed to how first-year programs can help students to consider and pursue future career options (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Van Etten, Pressley, McInery, & Liem, 2008), and Tom, Jonathan, Malcom, and Jamie all mentioned how their career interests were influenced, at least partially, by some of their experiences in Foundation Year.

The participants in this study also mentioned that they took advantage of academic supports – for example, their work with writing specialists or their work with math tutors – while in
Foundation Year, and this helps validate the work of Edmunds et al. (2010), Muraskin (1998), and Pan, Guo, Alikonis, and Bai (2008), all of whom emphasized the important roles that academic supports play in engaging students. Oja (2012) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argued that academic supports can help with passing classes and short term semester-to-semester persistence, respectively, and this was conferred in the case of the participants in this study, as they all consistently passed courses and persisted from at least the first year of college to the second. Malcolm stated that he benefited from working with his writing specialist because it helped him “plan in advance,” and Jonathan mentioned that his daily work with his math tutor helped him tremendously because he “always had problems with math.” Dvorak (2004) asserted that students who take advantage of academic supports – for instance, tutoring – are more likely to actively engage in their academic assignments, and Jamie personified this idea, as he spoke about how when he worked with his writing specialist, he would have an action plan about the specific elements of his writing that he wished to work on during a given meeting.

**Literature related to Black male students**

Much of college student-engagement theory today focuses on how colleges must be more adept at meeting the needs of the diverse learners who populate their campuses and courses (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2012; Harper, Berhanu, Davis, & McGuire, 2015; Harper & Harris, 2012; Koljatic & Kuh, 2001; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Kuh & Pike, 2005; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Black males among them. Again, this concept was addressed in this study, as the Black male participants believed they had positive experiences with various aspects of the program that are intended to engage students: taking classes as a cohort, small class sizes and ample office hours where faculty and students can get to know each other well, significant financial supports, class content catered to students’ interests,
etc. Moreover, in Foundation Year, the majority of the students are students of color and students who are Pell Grant eligible, meaning that they had significant financial aid needs, whereas the majority of Foundation Year professors and advisors are White. These racial differences, however, did not preclude close relationships that developed between participants and staff, as the theme of “caring” professors and advisors came up numerous times in participant interviews. In essence, it appears that, in many ways, the Foundation Year program, at least according to the five Black male interview participants, succeeded in engaging its students.

It’s important to note that the perceptions of the participants in this study were never representative of a single vision. Rather, the participants in this study had distinct, nuanced points of view about certain aspects of the program and its impact on them. For example, Jamie’s greatest takeaway from the program was that it helped him – a student already highly skilled in math – improve in writing, while Deon – also a student with a solid background in math – felt that the greatest takeaway was the reflective process he engaged in about his general behavior and the way he was perceived by faculty and staff, a reflective process that he credits to a meaningful conversation he shared with his advisor. This is but one simple example of the variance of responses and perspectives from the participants in this study; nevertheless, this contributes supportive evidence to the idea that, though described by a certain criteria – in this case, Pell Grant-eligible Black males – this group was obviously not monolithic (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2013), and to consider it to be so would be reflective of one seeing others as stereotypes rather than as individuals.

Most of the participants in this study acknowledged the benefit of the program providing financial supports, peer support in the form of a cohort model, and classes that explicitly
addressed relevant topics, for example, race. As such, this supported the work of Harper (2012), who asserted that these types of features of college can help to further engage Black males. Likewise, Harper and Harris’ (2012) mention of first-year seminar classes, classes that teach study skills and positive student habits, was relevant to this study. For instance, Tom’s reflection on his habit of planning out his academic work load week by week, Malcolm’s recollection of learning about time management, and Jonathan’s appreciation for learning how to send a formal e-mail message to a professor were likely the result of some of the tips they learned in The College Experience course, a course taught by Foundation Year advisors that helped promote student study skills as well as preparation for the transfer process.

Both Harper and Gasman (2008) and Wood and Palmer (2015) emphasize in their research that positive faculty interactions and encouragement can be important in engaging Black males in college. In this study, while not all participants’ memories of interacting with faculty were positive – for example, Deon shared a perspective of how one professor rushed the class through a lesson, making him feel frustrated and lost – most of the perspectives recounted a group of Foundation Year faculty and advisors who were intentional, helpful, and caring. So too, participants’ perspectives of being in a cohort, where they were taking courses with other students from similar backgrounds as themselves, were positive overall, as they were comfortable among and encouraged by their peers. This helps to validate arguments by Wood and Palmer (2015) and Brown (2009), who have emphasized the importance of peer support among Black male college students.

Unfortunately, participants also reported some negative perceptions of experiences on the Northeastern campus at large, leading to feelings of disengagement and alienation. Northeastern is a predominantly-White institution, and Tom, Malcolm, and Jamie all mentioned experiences
outside of Foundation Year where they felt that they didn’t quite fit in, or were downright
singled out in acts of discrimination because they were Black. These perspectives provide
evidence to back up research about how Black men can sometimes feel ostracized in certain
higher education settings (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot; Cuyjet, 2009; Harper, 2013a; Horford &
Grosland, 2013; Howard & Reynolds, 2013, Karkouti, 2016; Ogbu, 1988; Robertson & Mason,
2008; Steele, 2010).

Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006), Garibaldi (2007), and Wood and Palmer (2015) have
asserted that Black males should learn more about college opportunities while in high school.
Although it’s not clear if the participants in this study attended high schools that held formal
informational sessions about college, it is safe to say that all of the participants were encouraged
to attend college while in high school, whether this encouragement came from a family member,
guidance counselor, friend, or former classmate who told them about the Foundation Year
program. All of the participants mentioned growing up in a home where college was, at the very
least, encouraged or, in most cases, expected.

**Literature related to low-income students**

Kezar, Walpole, and Perna (2015) encourage colleges to be mindful of students’ financial aid
needs, particularly for lower-income students. Indeed, all of the participants in this study noted
the importance of the financial aid they received in both their decision to attend Foundation
Year, and, one might assume, part of their reason for persisting in it and earning one year’s worth
of college credit as a result. For instance, Tom mentioned that if he didn’t receive full financial
aid, either he or his mother would have been forced to work long hours during the week, putting
stress on his family and potentially interfering with his focus on school; Deon shared that his
assumption that the program would be “free” was an essential reason for him enrolling; and
Jamie remembered that when hearing about the program from a friend and learning that it gave significant financial aid as well as a free laptop, he was convinced it was a good fit for him. In short, if they were paying more for tuition, this could have prevented them from devoting sufficient time to their studies. Kezar, Walpole, and Perna (2015) and Engle and Lynch (2011) also asserted colleges should engage lower-income students by establishing first-year programs and learning communities where students can bond and support each other, as well as get targeted help from faculty in a relatively small, intimate setting. Again, participants’ positive perspectives on Foundation Year’s cohort model with an array of wrap-around supports substantiate these arguments.

In some ways, the experiences of participants in this study echoed some of the literature related to low-income college students, but at the same time defied some of the assumptions one might make based on this literature. For instance, some of the students in this study recounted growing up in schools that were prone to violence. Malcolm, Deon, and Jamie all said they attended schools that were the settings of frequent fights among students, and, at times, populated by disengaged teachers. This lends credence to the ideas that students from lower incomes are more likely to experience violence in schools (Wolniak & Enberg, 2010) and often have less substantive educational opportunities than their wealthier peers (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Lookson, 2013). Furthermore, Bowen and Bok (1998) and Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) have shown that financial struggles are one of the primary reasons for students not attending or dropping out of college. Lastly, on the subject of lower-income students struggling in college, researchers such as Corrigan (2013), Goddard (2003), and Wells (2008) asserted that these struggles might be due to said students being unfamiliar with the norms and culture of higher education environments. Based on all these studies, one would
assume that students in lower-income communities are impeded in their attempts to focus on school and pursue a higher education degree, and surely the participants in this study faced their share of challenges in getting to college and persisting while there. There is no doubt their journeys were not easy ones. Nevertheless, the fact that they came to college and persisted shows an inner strength and resiliency on their part, considering that they might not have had access to sufficient financial resources growing up. So too, the participants in this study were encouraged by friends and/or family members to attend college. They may not have been as familiar with college norms and culture as a student from a higher income family might be, but the sense of support that they received – the belief that they should go to college and earn a degree – likely helped them stay the course, despite their families’ limited financial resources.

**Implications for Future Research**

One of the possible downsides of this research – an aspect that can be viewed from an opposite, positive lens as well – was the intimate relationships shared between me and the participants. Foundation Year is a small program, typically serving between sixty to eighty students a year, which means that faculty and students get to know one another well. The former students who participated in this study all did fairly well in the classes I taught them, so there was a general sense of comfort when we sat down together for the interview. This all being said, I wonder what it would have been like if we were not close, or perhaps I did not know them at all. In other words, I can’t help but wonder what the interview responses would have been like if the interviewer was someone not associated at all with Foundation Year, a stranger to the participants. Would participants have felt more open about criticizing the program? Perhaps this could be the case, because I sometimes wondered if they felt the need to hold back any of their negative perceptions for fear that they did not want to offend me. This too is something I
wrote about in my positionality statement in chapter 1. In short, perhaps participants’ perspectives would have been phrased in different, more critical ways if I was not the person interviewing them, and this could have led to alternative future implications as a result.

Additionally, I wonder what an alternative IPA study might look like: one that focuses on Pell Grant-eligible Black males who did not complete Foundation Year. This alternative study would also likely reveal nuanced, rich information about former students’ perceptions of their time in the program, but perhaps this study would focus more on negative aspects of participants’ experiences in the program. If this were the case, these participants who did not complete the program may share very different perspectives about what engaged them and didn’t engage them in the program as compared to those who did complete it. When participants in this study were asked about the weaknesses of the program or what disengaged them, the answers varied. As a point of contrast, a prospective alternative study that focuses on students who did not complete the program could reveal common themes about student disengagement and thus be indicative of a trend. This alternative study could also help to illuminate what the program does well and where it falls short of students’ needs. In essence, an alternative study focusing on non-completers could provide value as one considers ways in which the program could be changed and improved in future years.

Finally, while this study revealed some interesting details and specifics about the participants’ perceptions of their experiences in Foundation Year, the larger themes were thought-provoking as well, and these larger themes could potentially act as the sole focus of future research projects. For instance, if studying the prevalent theme of “caring,” one might pursue future research by asking interview participants to think more specifically about this concept, and in doing so ask questions like: What specific interactions with peers made you feel cared for? What specific
interactions with faculty made you feel cared for? And what specific interactions with advisors made you feel cared for? In the way that this overarching theme, a theme that emerged from specific questions, now leads to new specific questions being generated, it illustrates the cyclical nature of research and writing. It shows that research can lay the groundwork for new ideas and lead researchers to unexpected and illuminating new findings.

**Implications for field practice**

Some of the various stakeholders related to the content of this study are: colleges, and more specifically, college programs, similar to Foundation Year; students similar to the ones highlighted in this study; and professors and advisors who work in programs similar to Foundation Year.

As for colleges, and more specifically, programs similar to Foundation Year, they should continue to provide financial supports to students. Without this integral component, students may not even consider going to college in the first place because they cannot afford it and instead need to work in order to support themselves and their families. There needs to be an institutional commitment to serving underrepresented student populations such as lower-income students and students of color, and this could be done through scholarships and grants set aside for students who meet these criteria.

Also, programs like this need to foster a sense of community among students, and taking classes as a cohort can be a means for doing so. When students get to know each other well, get comfortable around each other, and motivate and rely on each other for support, they are likely to feel less isolated and alone, and more likely to engage in the work at hand.

As for professors and advisors as stakeholders, they need to continue making efforts to actively engage their students, whether doing their best to have positive interactions with
students or crafting courses and assignments in ways that will hook their students’ interests. They should thoughtfully consider student feedback and tailor their teaching and interactions, both inside and outside of the classroom, with the intent of engaging students and developing positive relationships. Professors could request that students fill out surveys at the end of the semester that indicate what engaged them or disengaged them in a course, and plan future courses with an eye toward increasing student engagement accordingly.

When necessary, professors and advisors should also advocate for increased funding from colleges to continue doing the work they’re doing, especially if a given college is undergoing budget cuts or prioritizing their program offerings. Professors and advisors should point to successful student outcomes, and point to this as proof of the value of their work, and a reason for continuing it via generous financial assistance from a respective college institution or philanthropic organization.

In programs similar to Foundation Year, racial dynamics is an issue that professors and advisors need to consistently reflect upon. When White professors and advisors work with students of color, they need to maintain a level of critical consciousness, being sensitive to their students and how they might feel alienated in certain college settings. While the participants in this study liked taking classes as a cohort – and part of this reason might be that the overwhelming majority of students in Foundation Year are students of color – some still harbored doubts about their White professors’ abilities to relate to them. They, and other students of color, might experience stereotype threat, wondering if an individual professor is viewing them through the lens of a negative stereotype, a potential threat that could undermine their academic learning and growth.
Finally, for stakeholders who are students enrolled in programs like Foundation Year, the study points to the importance of putting significant time and effort into taking advantage of the opportunities available in such a program. First, these students should be encouraged to work closely with their peers, professors, and advisors, as this work will help them engage more effectively during their time in such an institution. They should also take advantage of academic supports, such as tutoring and office hours, where they can further develop their academic skills and competencies, while also making personal connections that can help develop a feeling of being supported and cared for.

Worth noting again is how race can affect student/faculty dynamics, and how students also need to be proactive in this context. For students who are students of color enrolling in a program where the majority of the professors and advisors are White, they may find it difficult to feel genuinely connected to their faculty. If this is the case, they should seek out organizations or affinity groups on campus where they could find a deeper sense of connection based on their race and/or ethnicity. At the same time, they should be encouraged to maintain an open mind if they feel skeptical about faculty members’ ability to treat them justly and make personal connections with them. Admittedly, a program with low numbers of faculty of color should espouse to diversify its personnel, and the onus here is on the institution, not the student. Still, if students keep an open mind, they may find that they develop a deep, positive rapport with professors and advisors, despite racial differences, and leverage these relationships in positive ways as they strive toward college success. Recall that Tom shared how he and some of his classmates were initially skeptical of some White professors in Foundation Year, wondering, “…what can these White professors help us with?” But as time passed, he realized, “oh, they like actually care. This is new.” As is true of most human relationships, people get to know each
other better with time. Both faculty and students should keep this in mind while working together, and realize that with the passing of time they can form strong bonds that create a sense of togetherness and compassion toward each other.

**Implications for personal practice**

In terms of my own personal practice and that of my colleagues in Foundation Year, we should continue to make transparent the many supports available to students and encourage students to tap into them. We should continue to make explicit to students that by taking advantage of such supports they will have a greater likelihood of succeeding in college. We should also continue to call upon former students who completed the program to speak to this fact. Furthermore, this type of work can continue even when students exit Foundation Year. That is, before departing the program we faculty members could provide them with a list of some ways to continue to be “engaged” in college after leaving the program, perhaps touching upon areas like: using tutoring resources, using financial aid resources, working with classmates who are reliable and supportive, making an effort to engage with faculty and advisors, and finding people in your life – whether inside or outside the context of college – who genuinely “care” about you and from whom you’ll feel a sense of support.

Another action item could be targeting specific colleges and looking at what they have available in terms of resources that would help engage students. For instance, if a student is transferring to UMass Boston, perhaps we in Foundation Year could create a sheet that lists some of the names, contact information, and web addresses for some of the offices on UMass Boston’s campus – for example, the tutoring center or a student organization focusing specifically on Black students – that could help to engage students at said institution. This could help students
as they transition to this new environment and make this adjustment period less arduous and more efficient.

A third action item could be promoting more Black men to go into the field of education. All of the participants in this study acknowledged the issue of a lack of teachers of color in their experiences in secondary schools in Boston and in college. While this was not necessarily a significant point of tension in their experiences within the Foundation Year program, participants did imply that professors of color both in the Foundation Year program and in their respective colleges at large would be beneficial. While the majority of students in Boston Public Schools are students of color, the majority of teachers are White (Boston Public Schools, 2017). This ratio would narrow if there were more teachers of color in the city’s school system, including Black men. Therefore, promoting education career paths for men of color, particularly Black males, is another action item that should be brought to the table. In collaboration with other entities in the Northeastern community – for instance, CPS’s Graduate School of Education – we could craft a presentation touting some benefits of going into the field of education as a career.

Moreover, there is an opportunity for students to learn about job opportunities not only in primary and secondary schools, but in higher education. Again, perhaps with assistance from professors and students in CPS’s Graduate School of Education, Black male students enrolled in Foundation Year could learn about the wide spectrum of opportunities on college campuses, for instance, work in the areas of finance, admissions, counseling, academic integrity, and campus security, just to name a few.

Fourth, Foundation Year faculty and advisors should continue to be conscious of making strong personal connections with students enrolled in the program. The most prominent theme that emerged from this study’s interviews was that of “caring” professors and advisors. Thus,
those who work in the program should be mindful to keep this as a central goal for their work. Faculty and advisors should continue to encourage their students and help them when they need it. They should continue to be clear and evenhanded with students when they fall short of expectations, and be explicit when offering suggestions for how students can grow both academically and personally. And, most significantly, they should let students know that they “care,” whether this caring be school-related or more focused on a student’s personal well-being.

Fifth, we as a Foundation Year faculty should continue to call upon former Pell Grant-eligible Black males who completed Foundation Year to come back and share their perspectives of their experiences in the program – the challenges they faced and the successes they achieved. This type of undertaking, whether the former students serve on a panel on a particular day or come back periodically during a given semester, could motivate students enrolled in the program at present. In other words, students enrolled in the program might identify with or feel inspired by former students who completed the program. Hearing about former students’ struggles could make enrolled students feel less alone, as they would recognize that all students, even those who did well and completed the program, go through hard times on occasion. Moreover, hearing about former students’ successes, despite the challenges they’ve faced in their lives and in their past educational experiences, could provide enrolled student with a sense that they too have the ability to complete Foundation Year and succeed in college thereafter.

To complement this, my colleagues and I in Foundation Year should think more intentionally about finding ways in which our students could be paired with mentors. Although we have had former students informally mentor students when they return to Foundation Year and meet current students, no formal program of this sort has been established. By learning more about mentoring best practices and asking other resources on campus for advice – for instance, the
African American Institute (AAI) or Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion (OIDI) – I could begin to piece together more formal and meaningful ways for our current students to connect with mentors.

Sixth, I can begin to take action by proposing workshops or discussions that could appeal to the interests of Black males in Foundation Year, whether these are facilitated within the program, or in conjunctions with other resources on campus, such as the AAI, OIDI, or Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning through Research (CATLR).

Seventh, I could explore opportunities to connect with Black male students in the area of program development. For instance, in the spring of 2018, CATLR started an initiative aimed to encourage faculty/student collaborations. This is something I plan to explore and learn more about.

Finally, in keeping with the spirit of being a qualitative researcher who values his participants’ words and experiences, I could continue to provide a platform for my students to share their voices by interviewing them in podcasts or video segments. By doing so, we could capture and archive students perceptions of their experiences in Foundation Year, and this too could have an impact on future students, as it could provide a way for them to feel a sense of connection with others who have been through similar experiences as themselves.

Reflections as a Scholar Practitioner

As someone who’s worked in the field of education now for twenty years, I have had a lot of time to grow and develop as a practitioner. I began my career teaching middle and high school English, and for the majority of my career I’ve taught in college settings. In essence, I’ve received a lot of training in various teaching practices, and have tried to hone these skills on a yearly basis. Nonetheless, I never considered myself to have a strong foundation in formal
scholarship until being a doctoral student. During this time, I learned to rely on theory, literature, and research methodology in planning and following through on various scholarly projects, including this thesis. Frankly speaking, I had no prior experience with this, despite working for the past thirteen years in college settings, and I think these newly-adopted skills will help me going forward in my career. While I believe much of the day-to-day work I’ve done within the Foundation Year program has been reflective of scholar practitioner norms, I am now more equipped to undertake formal research, and this could be an asset to me professionally, to the program I work in, and, most importantly, to the students with whom I work.

I am happy to have a stronger foundation in research and feel more confident in my ability to design and conduct more formal scholarly work. I am also glad that I experienced what it’s like to conduct an IPA study. Intuitively, I knew I’d enjoy interviewing participants, because I’ve always enjoyed having meaningful conversations with people in my own life, whether friends or family members, and I particularly enjoy when these conversations happen in close company, including one-on-one situations. More recently, I’ve become an ardent podcast listener – Marc Maron’s *WTF*, Bill Simmons’ *The Bill Simmons Podcast*, and Larry Wilmore’s *Black on the Air* are among some of my favorites – and find that when I listen to intimate and insightful conversation, I learn about life. It can be a very rich and compelling experience. All this being said, I loved conducting interviews with the participants in this study. Admittedly, I’d felt a certain degree of kinship with these participants prior to the study. But this sense of connection became even stronger as a result of it.

To now be able to merge my breadth of experience in the *practice* aspect of my work to my still new, but growing, *scholarly* aspect of my work is an asset to me as a professional educator. The Northeastern University Graduate School of Education’s emphasis on the scholar-
practitioner model complements my work as a faculty member in Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies, and, more broadly, as a faculty member in the university as a whole. We professors not only want our students to become knowledgeable about the subject matters and scholarship we teach, but we also want them to be competent and curious when putting these concepts into practice. In summary, my takeaways and growth as a scholar practitioner are not only of value to me. They are of value to my students as well.
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