

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: A DIFFERENT WORLD: AFRICAN AMERICAN,  
FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE WOMEN AT A  
SELECTIVE UNIVERSITY

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Education

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending a selective university. Following interpretive case study methodology, the major research questions guiding this study were: How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic and social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education? And How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence? Through demographic questionnaire responses and individual semi-structured interviews with five African American women attending the University of Pennsylvania, participants identified the ways that their collegiate experiences were shaped by their social identities, precollege academic and social experiences, and interactions with members of their campus and home communities. Findings indicated that African American, first generation college women graduate from high school with a strong academic sense of self, developed after years of parental encouragement for academic achievement and positive precollege experiences with teachers and counselors. This academic sense of self contributed to students' ability to adapt to the academic competitiveness and classroom expectations of their given major

upon matriculation. With time and self-reflection, students began to engage in academic behaviors linked with success. Socially, early experiences of isolation or alienation primarily occurred during students' first semester, but were mitigated through interactions with peers or engagement in campus organizations and activities. Students identified availability of financial resources, their strong support networks, and their intrinsic motivation and academic self-efficacy as factors that contributed to their college persistence within the setting of a selective university. Finally, students specifically described how five salient aspects of their identity - their race, class, academic sense of self, gender, and spirituality, influenced not only the ways they individually engaged with the college environment, but also their perceptions of various members of the campus community. The findings of this study contributes to the complexity of understanding how African American, first generation college women experience a selective campus environment. Implications for campus policies and practices, as well as recommendations for future research are presented.

A DIFFERENT WORLD: AFRICAN AMERICAN, FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE  
WOMEN AT A SELECTIVE UNIVERSITY

By

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: my mother Earlene Hill, my father James Johnson, my brother Jayce “Eddie” Hill, and my sister Janelle Johnson. Without each of you, I would not be who I am today.

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It has only been through God's grace and the support of my family and friends that I complete this journey. To each and every person I have met and worked with over the years, I thank you as each of those experiences have contributed to the person I am today.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The numbers of African Americans<sup>1</sup> attending four-year institutions of higher education have grown substantially over the past 30 years. Whereas approximately 634,300 African Americans attended four-year institutions in 1980, that number increased to 1,767,000 by 2009 (NCES, 2010a). There has also been a steady increase in the representation of African American students at private four-year institutions, rising from 8.0% in 1980, to 11.1% in 2000, and 16.7% in 2009 (NCES, 2010a). Scholars have found that attending a four-year institution increases the likelihood that students will persist and earn a bachelor's degree (Cabrera, Burkham, & La Nasa, 2005; Goldrick-Rabb, 2006). For the 2004 cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen, the 6-year graduation rate for African American students at private four-year institutions was 44.9%, compared to 38.3% for African Americans at public four-year institutions (NCES, 2012). At the "most selective" private institutions (institutions which admit 25% or less of applicants), the 6-year graduation rate for African Americans is 69.2% (NCES, 2012). Some specific institutional examples include 96.6% at Harvard University, 95.6% at Yale University, and 93.5% at Princeton University (collegeresults.org, 2012).

Given these trends, the increasing numbers of African American students entering and succeeding in private institutions of higher education provides a perfect opportunity to explore the academic and social experiences of students within this context. Currently, the literature in this area is limited in several ways. First, while there are studies that explore issues of access to highly selective institutions for African American students (e.g., Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Torbin, 2005; Harper & Griffin,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "African American," "Black American," and Black are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript. When appropriate, specific terms representing students' racial/cultural backgrounds will be used.

2011), fewer studies explicitly explore the experiences of students once enrolled (e.g., Charles, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009; Small & Winship, 2007). Moreover, of studies available most describe “African American students” as a monolithic group, not explicitly taking into consideration how the various social identities of students, such as their socioeconomic status (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bowen et al., 2005; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Walpole, 2008), gender (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Harris, Palmer, & Strauve, 2011; Ostrove, 2003), and academic ability (Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007) intersect to shape collegiate experiences within this context.

Consequently, within the literature on Black college students, there is a paucity of research available to understand how the intersection of one’s race, class, gender, and academic ability shape students’ experiences on campus (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Stewart, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013). As more African American students from diverse backgrounds enter and succeed in postsecondary education, there is a need to continue to explore this population across various dimensions, to provide information about how students experience college, and to discover what institutions can do to support their educational journey. To that end, this study sought to extend our understanding of the within-group differences of African American students by exploring the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students at a private, highly selective, predominantly White university.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The personal and societal benefits of pursuing postsecondary education are well documented. These benefits include involvement in extracurricular activities, opportunities to participate in various in social and cultural events, higher lifetime

earnings, increased civic participation, better health, longer life, and a lower probability of unemployment (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Bowen et al., 2005). Previous studies have shown that graduates of selective institutions tend to experience greater overall gains both financially and socially compared to graduates of less selective institutions (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen et al., 2005; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Dale & Krueger, 1999; Fischer & Massey, 2007; Walpole, 2008). Top-ranked institutions of higher education command substantially more resources than other institutions and can provide access to professional networks that would be unavailable to non-students. Graduates of these prestigious institutions may also leave with a more favorable status in the market when it comes to looking for potential employment and graduate study opportunities (Astin, 1993; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Carnevale & Rose, 2004). Given the benefits of higher education in general, and of attending a selective college or university in particular, there is considerable competition for “spots” within these institutions. Thus, debates about “who” gets into these institutions has caused increased media and political attention that has led to policies and practices designed to increase the numbers of traditionally underrepresented groups, especially women, racial/ethnic minorities, and lower-income students attending selective institutions of higher education (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Fischer & Massey, 2007).

While the numbers of women, racial/ethnic minorities, and lower-income individuals attending selective four-year institutions of higher education continue to grow, studies examining the experiences of students reveal that the benefits of attending for this group is not without cost. Bowen, Kurzweil, and Torbin (2005), for example, report that minority graduates of selective colleges and universities, like those from low

socioeconomic backgrounds, are relatively less satisfied with their undergraduate experiences than their White, affluent classmates. Aries and Seider (2005) found that first generation college students and lower-income students attending selective colleges became more aware of their class status upon arrival at college, and some reported feeling intimidated by the wealthy students and described a sense of exclusion and powerlessness on campus. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2001) found that African American students experienced microaggressions, subtle race-based insults directed at students of color, which fostered a negative campus racial climate, created self-doubt and frustration among students, and negatively influenced interactions with faculty and staff on campus. Lastly, Ostrove (2003) found that while lower-income and first generation students believed that attending elite institutions were key to their upward social mobility, there were clear class divides socially that limited opportunities to develop friendships and network with more affluent peers. So while these students are ultimately “successful” as evidenced by their earned degree, these studies suggest that minority, first generation, and lower-income students encounter some negative incidents both inside and outside of the classroom throughout their undergraduate career. Given the continued efforts to recruit minority students and lower-income students to attend selective institutions, these findings demonstrate the need to gain a better sense of the contemporary experiences of this population within this setting, the nature of their interactions with various members of the campus community, and the strategies they draw upon to persist within these affluent, predominantly White environments.



## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending a selective university. This study sought to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 2) How do African American, first generation college students describe their social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 3) How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence?

## **Rationale for the Study**

While previous studies have explored the collegiate experiences of African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (e.g., Allen, 1992; Davis et al., 2004; Fries-Britt, 1998; Guiffrida, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a), these studies are limited in two major areas. First, previous studies often focus on the experiences of students attending public and non-selective four-year institutions, or neglect to differentiate experiences by institution type at all. The diversity of institutions within higher education provides justification for an expansion of research that explicitly seeks to understand how students experience “college” across different institutional contexts. An expanded view of how African American students experience selective PWIs serves this purpose. Second, most studies treat African American students as a monolithic

group, limiting our understanding of how Black students experience college based upon their various social identities including ethnicity, class, gender, academic ability, sexual identity, and religious affiliations (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Strayhorn, 2013). As the educational research on access and persistence issues for African American and first generation students continues to grow and evolve, the body of literature that focuses specifically on first generation college students who are African American within the context of selective colleges and universities is virtually non-existent. This study adds to this body of research by providing a contemporary understanding of the collegiate experiences by race, class, and gender for a particular sub-group of African Americans: academically talented, first generation college students.

This study follows an anti-deficit approach to studying the experiences African American, first generation college students. Scholars have examined the structural barriers to college access and retention experienced by these students, often focusing on departure or attrition (Astin, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Unfortunately, our increased understanding of the factors that lead to student attrition in college have yet to substantially diminish the rates of student attrition or “failure” over time (Gándara, 1995). While we know a considerable amount about the barriers to college enrollment and persistence, what is less understood is *how* students mitigate barriers to college access, navigate the educational process, and persist to graduation. One approach to gaining a better sense of how African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to persistence is through qualitative research that seeks to understand the experiences of these students from their perspective (Glesne, 2011; Harper, 2007). To that end, this study examines academic and social experiences of African American, first

generation college students within the selective college context, and provides a greater understanding of the perceptions of the selective college environment, as well as the strategies these students use to successfully mitigate barriers to college persistence.

### **Study Design**

This study followed qualitative methods and an interpretive multiple case design to present a detailed illustration of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college women who attend a selective institution of higher education. Three frameworks were selected to design the conceptual lens for the study. They are: Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Output College Impact Model; Padilla's (1997) Local Model of Minority Student Success in College; and Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital. Each perspective added important factors useful for understanding the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students within the context of a selective university. Moreover, this study's design is informed by an extensive review of the literature in the areas of retention, college experience, and college environments. Specifically, these topics include: factors affecting college persistence and retention for first generation students, African American students, and low-income students; predominantly White Institutions (PWIs); selective colleges and universities; high achieving and gifted students; and the impact of college environments on student experiences.

In this study, each participant is a *case*, bounded by her experiences within the context of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), a selective institution of higher education. In bounding the cases in this manner, each student's social, cultural, and personal experiences are not simply described, but can be understood in relation to the

interactions that each individual have encountered over time. Additionally, cross-case analysis was used to understand commonalities and differences across participants' experiences within this institutional context. Consistent with case study methodology, data for the study was collected via a variety of methods. I collected primary data from each participant through a demographic questionnaire and three semi-structured individual interviews. Secondary data consisted of a review of institutional documents and reports as well as informal observations of campus events and activities. Primary and secondary data were utilized to compile a rich and detailed description of each participant, their academic and social experiences, and provide context for their perceptions of the educational environment within the context of Penn.

Purposeful sampling methods (Merriam, 2009) were used to select Penn for this study (see Chapter 1: Research Site for more details about the site). I also followed purposeful sampling techniques to select participants to secure information rich cases. I interviewed 5 students for this study. Each participant met the specified criteria for inclusion in the study: at least 18 years of age and, (1) self-identify as African American or Black, (2) a first generation college student (defined as neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree), and (3) a junior or senior at Penn. The participants' experiences are reported by pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis is the process of "bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 150). For this study, data was primarily collected in the forms of demographic questionnaires and interviews. My data analysis was completed in several stages. First, after organizing the data and coding them by categories aligned with my conceptual framework, I created individual descriptive

case profiles for each participant. Next, in reference to the research questions, I engaged in cross-case analysis to identify the prominent themes that cut across participants' experiences. During this process, additional categories were developed for emergent themes not addressed by the research questions or the initial literature review. NVivo 10, a computer assisted qualitative software package, was utilized to support organizing, coding, and the retrieval of data.

### **Significance of Study**

As African Americans continue to be underrepresented in college enrollment and degree attainment, it is important to understand not only their academic and social experiences in college, but also how students successfully overcome the various barriers to educational attainment. This study has the potential to add value to the existing body of research for several reasons. First, the emphasis on selective institutions differentiates this study from others on minority students at PWIs, and thus allows for a greater understanding of this specific institutional context, and how minority students experience these environments. Second, by focusing on students who have achieved junior and senior status on campus, this study allows for a more expansive exploration of the academic and social experiences of students, moving beyond previous studies that primarily focus on issues of access or the transition from high school to college. Finally, the intersectional nature of this research allows for a more complex examination of the competing identities of race, class, gender, and academic ability within the context of a selective institution of higher education where the campus norms were based upon White, middle/upper class values. This study also has implications for policy and practice. These findings can aid institutional leaders when making decisions as to how to foster

college persistence and enhance the overall experiences of first generation, low-income and minority students on their campus. Moreover, this study also serves as an example of how qualitative research can enhance institutional statistical data to extend our understanding of trends occurring within a particular institutional context.

### **About the Site**

Penn is a private, residential college located in the urban setting of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. According to institutional data publically available via the University of Pennsylvania's website, as of Fall 2012, the campus educates approximately 10,300 full-time undergraduate students. Ninety-four percent of the freshman class was in the top 10% of their high school graduating class. Of those accepted for admission to the Class of 2016, 40% are black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American. Per a Fall 2011 report, the total full-time undergraduate enrollment of African American/Black students is 7.1%. Last reported in 2010, the mean six-year<sup>2</sup> graduation rate for African American/Black undergraduates at this institution was 92.6% for females, and 89% for males, compared to 95.5% for the overall student body (collegeresults.org, 2012). The cost for tuition and fees for 2012-2013 was \$43,738. Approximately 13% of freshmen were Pell-Grant recipients, while 9% of the overall undergraduate population was Pell-Grant recipients. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2010) classified this institution as a "Research University–Very High."

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<sup>2</sup>Last reported in 2010, the mean four-year graduation rate for African American/Black undergraduates at this institution was 86.4 percent for females, and 78 percent for males, compared to 88.6 percent for the overall student body (collegeresults.org. 2012).

Founded in 1789, Penn is one of the oldest and most selective institutions of higher education in the United States. The institution exclusively educated White men until 1876, and formally enrolled African American men in 1879. In 1967, Penn adopted an “Admissions Policy for the Undergraduate Schools of the University of Pennsylvania” as an effort to increase recruitment, retention, and promotion of minority students, faculty, administrators, and trustees. By 1972, an official Minority Recruitment Program was created to deliberately recruit African American students to attend Penn. In the decades following these initiatives, the university sanctioned the creation of student organizations and courses relevant to the African American student experience.

Under the leadership of President Amy Gutman (2004-Present), Penn has committed to expanding the socioeconomic diversity of the institution by “making a world-class education attainable to all talented and hardworking students, regardless of their economic circumstances” (Penn Compact, 2004). To that end, Penn has expanded its need-based financial aid program and currently awards no-loan financial aid packages to all undergraduate students with demonstrated financial need. This financial aid policy has resulted in an increase in applicants from low and middle-income families since the policy’s inception in 2004.

Penn offers a number of programs and services to specifically support traditionally underrepresented student populations academically and socially. Each of the four undergraduate schools within the university, the School of Arts and Sciences; the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences; the School of Nursing and the Wharton School of Business has an Office of Multicultural Affairs dedicated to advising and supporting women and students of color within their respective disciplines. Moreover,

the campus sponsors several support programs and activities to facilitate the transition of new students to the college environment and academic expectations at Penn. These programs and activities include the Multicultural Scholars Preview Program, a Spring overnight program for admitted students from diverse backgrounds; the Center for Africana Studies Summer Institute for Pre-Freshman (Africana), an intensive one-week course of study designed to expose students to intellectual and cultural themes in African and African Diaspora studies; the Pre-Freshman Program (PFP), a four-week academic summer experience for newly admitted students; the Pennsylvania College Achievement Program (PENNCAP), which offers comprehensive student support services including academic enrichment, cultural activities, tutoring, and counseling support for academically talented students, many from low-income or first-generation backgrounds; and the Ronald B. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair), a federally funded TRIO program that prepares eligible (low-income and first generation or members of racial/ethnic groups underrepresented in graduate education) students for graduate studies leading to a Ph.D. Penn is also a partner with QuestBridge, a nonprofit organization that recruits and supports motivated high-achieving, low-income students to and through college (QuestBridge, 2012) and the POSSE Foundation, a college access and leadership development program that places cohorts of talented students at partner colleges and universities (POSSE Foundation, 2012).

In addition to these programs Penn also houses several cultural centers that serve as “homes for communities organized around race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality” (Penn website, 2012). The Makuu: Black Cultural Center, for example, was founded in 2000 to serve as a cultural resource center for those interested in Black culture. The



center also serves as the hub for Umoja, an umbrella group composed of all black student organizations. Celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary during the 2012-2013 academic year, the W.E.B. Dubois College House opened in 1972 as a response to the needs voiced by African American students who wanted an African American theme-based house. The smallest of the eleven College Houses at Penn, Dubois College House attempts to cultivate a strong sense of community through events and programs. Today, the Dubois College House is one of the most diverse college houses on campus.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following section provides definitions of the key terms that I use to describe members of my target population.

African American/Black: individuals who have at least a partial ancestry from any of the native sub-Saharan populations of Africa. This definition includes first or continuing generation immigrants from the Caribbean, Central America, South America, or other nations who self-identify as Black American.

First Generation College Student: a college student where neither parent (or legal guardian) has attained a baccalaureate degree. One or more parent may have some postsecondary educational experiences (e.g. associates degree, college credits earned), but neither has completed the four-year degree (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006).

Selective Institutions: colleges and universities who admit less than 50% of applicants. “Most Selective” institutions of higher education admit 25% or less of applicants.

High Achievers: The terms *high achiever*, *gifted* and *academically talented* have been used interchangeably to define students with superior intelligence that is

measurable by quantitative tests such as IQ, SAT, or ACT (Fries-Britt, 1997; Walpole, McDonough, Bauer et al. 2005) and/or exceptional academic performance on the collegiate level as demonstrated by a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher (Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

Socioeconomic Status (SES): The following factors combined were used to determine students' SES: a) students' financial aid eligibility, b) parents' educational attainment level, and c) parents' occupational status (Astin & Oseguera, 2004).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review provides a context for exploring the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students and the strategies that lead to persistence within a selective college or university. I have organized this chapter into two sections, 1) the conceptual framework guiding the study and 2) a review of the literature useful for understanding the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending selective Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). I begin by providing a summary of the three perspectives used to develop the conceptual framework guiding this inquiry. First, Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Output (IEO) Model to explore the dialectical relationship between students and the campus environment, and how these interactions shape students' experiences in college. Next, I review Padilla's (1997) Local Model of Minority Student Success in College to gain a better understanding of the strategies successful students use to mitigate barriers to college persistence at PWIs. I end with a review of cultural and social capital as described by Bourdieu (1986) to gain a better sense of how these concepts structure access and opportunity within selective educational settings.

Building upon the factors delineated from the conceptual framework, in the second section I provide a summary of relevant literature useful for understanding the academic and social experiences of my target population. I begin with a brief review of the literature concerning the precollege experiences of African American students. I then turn to a review of extant literature on African American college students and their experiences at PWIs. Next, I explore the collegiate experiences of this population by race/ethnicity, first generation status, socioeconomic status, class, gender, and academic

ability. For each of these areas, I focus on the experiences of students attending selective institutions. I conclude with a summary of the themes that cut across each of these areas.

### **Conceptual Framework**

**Astin's IEO College Impact Model.** Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Output (IEO) College Impact Model examines the relationship between students' background characteristics (inputs), their campus environment, and their subsequent outcomes. The model is longitudinal in nature allowing for an assessment of the ways institutionally specific interactions shape students' experiences overtime and lead to educational and personal outcomes. According to Astin, "inputs refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of entry to the institution" (p. 7). These include students' demographic characteristics (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, gender), parental background, as well their high school academic performance (e.g., GPA, SAT scores, academic rigor in high school).

The IEO College Impact Model places a particular emphasis on the campus environment and the interactions between the student and the campus environment through institutional policies and practices as well as engagement and interactions with faculty and peers. The campus environment is a reflection of its institutional characteristics (e.g. private, public, level of selectivity), the history and mission of the institution, the faculty and their teaching orientations, and the peer environment (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998; Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinsten, 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Consistent with person-environment interaction theories (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), Astin found that individual students engage with the campus environment through involvement in the academic and social aspects of campus life. He

found that academic involvement is positively related to academic development factors. Furthermore he found that the peer group had the single most important influence on college students learning and personal development. Next to the peer group, student-faculty interactions were particularly important, positively affecting academic ability, self-confidence, and leadership skills (Guiffrida, 2003; Tinto, 1993). These interactions impact college outcomes differently depending upon the amount of time and energy (physical and psychological) invested by students into their college experiences.

Although not a focus of Astin's model, the campus climate students encounter influences whether African American students attending PWIs feel they *want* to invest the time and energy necessary to successfully integrate into their campus environment. Scholars have noted that opportunities for student engagement is hampered for some student populations who experience a negative racial campus climate (Mendoza-Denton, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002; Solórzano et al., 2001), those who have financial constraints (Bergerson, 2007; Perna, 2010), and those who perceive the campus to be exclusionary on the basis of social class (Aries & Seider, 2005; Ostrove & Long, 2007). Subsequent studies using the IEO College Impact Model (e.g. Pike & Kuh, 2005) expanded on the limitations of this model to include diverse student populations and institution types, given that the participants in Astin's original study were predominantly White, traditionally aged, full-time students attending four-year institutions.

The IEO College Impact Model is useful for several reasons. First, the model recognizes that students are not a blank slate when they enter college, their demographic background and precollege experiences matter. Second, its emphasis on the student-environment interactions allows for an examination of the dialectal relationship between

the two entities, and how this relationship may influence how students perceive their academic and social experiences on campus over time. Finally, the model allows for an examination of the ways that students engage or interact with the campus environment, both physically and psychologically, which will help gain a better sense of the ways students learn to navigate the campus.

**Padilla's Local Model of Minority Student Success in College.** Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1997) offer a model for examining the experiences of minority (African American, Hispanic and Native American) students in college. Based largely upon Padilla's (1994) expertise model of successful minority college students and Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, Padilla et al. (1997) argues that success requires a combination of theoretical (formal/book) knowledge and heuristic (campus specific) knowledge, stressing the importance of the acquisition of this knowledge during the critical first year of college. These findings are supported by other studies that emphasize the importance of students acquiring campus specific knowledge to facilitate college adjustment (e.g. Haussman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Nora, 2004; Smedley, Meyers, & Harrell, 1993).

Their model also suggests that minority students encounter social and institutional barriers from their initial transition from high school through their persistence to graduation from college. Padilla and associates organize these barriers into four categories: (1) discontinuity barriers, (2) lack of nurturing barriers, (3) lack of presence barriers, and (4) resource barriers. Discontinuity barriers refer to the obstacles students may encounter as they transition from their home community to the campus community. These barriers begin with the transition from high school to college. In order to be

successful students “need to learn how to adjust to the new physical environment, learn to become more independent away from their family, and adjust to the new academic demands of the curriculum” (Padilla et al., 1997, p. 129). Research focusing specifically on the experiences of African American students have found that upon arrival on campus, students often feel isolated and alienated within predominantly White institutions and often do not know where to turn to for academic and social support (Allen, 1992; Charles, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009; 2009; Davis et al., 2004). The second category of barriers is lack of nurturing. “These barriers dealt with the absence of supportive resources on the campus needed to facilitate the adjustment and development of minority students” (Padilla et al., 1997, p. 131). Successful students recognized that they had to nurture themselves or acquire nurturing from others either on or off campus. These students would engage in positive self-talk to reaffirm their self-worth and would actively pursue support from campus groups or supportive persons. For African American students at PWIs, these nurturing resources also included engaging in campus social support structures such as Black cultural centers, and participation in ethnic student organizations and events (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Patton, 1997).

The third category of barriers is lack of presence. This includes “the absence of minorities in the curriculum, in the university's programs, and in the general population of students, staff, and faculty on campus” (Padilla et al., 1997, p. 131). These structural diversity issues strongly influence perceptions of campus racial climate (Allen, 1992; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Charles et al., 2009; Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007). Lack of structural diversity contributes to feelings of isolation and alienation as described

above. This may be more pronounced at PWIs with a history of racial exclusion (Chang, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2005; Fischer, 2007; Harper, Patton, & Woodsen, 2009; Solórzano et al., 2001). According to their model, successful minority students acknowledge the importance of minority support and actively seek out the ethnic presence that exists on campus through participation in ethnic student organizations, for example. Finally, the resource barrier relates to the difficulty students may have with the financial aid system. For who need financial aid to attend college and persist to degree completion, changes to financial aid are dramatically important (Bergerson, 2007; Charles et al., 2009; Perna, 2010). This is especially true for students attending high cost public or private PWIs (Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999). To overcome this barrier, successful students networked with peers and professional staff members who understood the financial aid system, learned how to complete the financial aid forms, and sought out scholarship opportunities.

In their model, Padilla and associates argue that success on a particular campus requires campus specific or *heuristic* knowledge that can only be acquired over-time through interaction with knowledgeable others on campus including upper-classmen, staff, or faculty. This model is useful because first, it is a success theory offering clues as to what students do that *foster* their college persistence rather than focusing on their failures, and second it is built upon the experiences of minority students attending a predominantly White institution, consistent with the methodology of this study. Padilla's local model of minority student success can serve as an example of how to address the structural barriers to college persistence encountered by students within a specific institutional context. With a better understanding the campus specific knowledge



necessary to mitigate barriers to persistence, institutions can be more intentional in their efforts to transmit this knowledge formally and informally to new and continuing students through faculty, staff, and upper-classmen.

**Cultural and Social Capital.** Within educational literature, cultural capital refers to a set of preferences and values that shape one's perception of the viability of education (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006), while social capital is a set of networks or connections that facilitate the gathering of resources necessary for academic and professional success (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). The concepts of cultural and social capital have been used to describe and explain how individuals choose colleges and whether or not they are successful upon matriculation (Berger, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Walpole, 2003; 2008). Next, I provide an overview of these concepts and how they can be used to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students.

***Cultural capital.*** Cultural capital refers to “the system of attitudes such as language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms...that defines an individual's class status” (Perna, 2006, p. 111). Originally conceptualized by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the Bourdiean framework argues that signals of cultural capital are passed unconsciously from parents to children because they are learned through family and community socialization, or their habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). In relation to educational goals and aspirations, these socializations provide students living within the same community with a contextual worldview or perspective regarding the viability of higher education (Berger, 2000). Lamont and Lareau (1988) define cultural capital as “institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences,

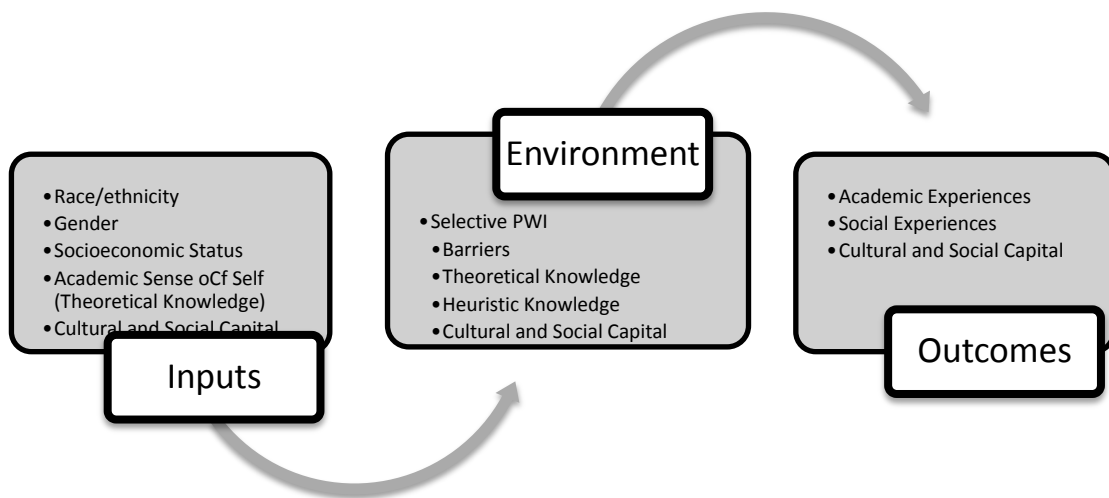
formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156). Within schools, educators differentially value high status cultural capital, rewarding students from dominant cultural backgrounds who possess this capital, leaving those students with non-dominant cultural capital “at-risk” for lower success rates in schools (Walpole, 2008). In this view, possessing the cultural capital that is valued by the educational system has significant implications for students, particularly those being educated in lower-income communities. Students who embody the high status cultural capital are *selected out* and afforded access to the resources available within schools to enhance their educational preparation and expand their aspirations and opportunity for college enrollment and success (Berger, 2000; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; McDonough, 1997).

Relative to the topic of the educational experiences of African American, first generation college students, cultural capital can be used to “improve our understanding of the process through which social stratification systems are maintained” (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 154). The concept of cultural capital is used to examine how culture and education combine to contribute to social reproduction (Berger, 2000; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; MacLeod, 2009), disparities in educational achievement across social classes (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio, 1982; Walpole, 2008), and the stratification of higher education by class and race (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). This framework is particularly germane given that the participants in this study are students attending a selective institution of higher education, who come from racial and socioeconomic backgrounds that are different from the majority of the campus population.

*Social capital.* Pierre Bourdieu is credited with the first contemporary analysis of social capital (Portes, 1998). According to Bourdieu, (1986) social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 51). In other words, social capital is derived from relationships with those who have access to the resources that are important or held in high regard. He goes on to assert that the amount of social capital an individual possess is contingent upon the size of their network, as well as an individuals’ economic and cultural standing. James Coleman (1988) conceptualizes social capital as “a resource for action” (p. 95). This means that individuals engage in certain relationships or participate in certain networks because of the anticipation of some tangible benefit. Using the conceptualizations of social capital offered by Bourdieu and Coleman, social networks work because 1) they facilitate the flow of information; 2) these social ties exert influence on the agents who play a critical role in decisions involving the individual; and 3) these resources are certification of an individual’s credentials as one who belongs and can potentially add value to the group (Dika & Singh, 2002; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1998).

The Bourdiean approach to social capital has been used in educational research to explain differential experiences in schools by race, gender, and class, family-school relations, and dropout behaviors, while the Coleman definition has been used to examine the ways family structure and parent-child interaction variables influence educational outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). In higher education research these concepts have been used to explore how family support (Perna & Titus, 2005), school context (González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Hemmings, 1991), and connections with individuals familiar with

college (McDonough, 1997; Walpole, 2003) provide students with the information necessary to understand how to navigate the educational environment in general, and the collegiate environment in particular. Taken together, Bourdieu's and Coleman's conceptualizations of social capital imply that some individuals are privileged because of their memberships within, or understanding of, dominant social networks. Consequently, the historical significance of race and class in American society put African American and first generation college students at a marked disadvantage when it comes to understanding the context of a selective campus environment and how to successfully navigate these institutions.



**Figure 2.1**

***Conceptual Model for Study***

**Summary of the Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for the study integrated each of the aforementioned perspectives in order to understand the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation African American students attending a selective PWI. This conceptual model is outlined as Figure 2.1. This framework subsequently informed the

interview protocol and data analysis procedures. Specific factors were explored in the literature to gain a better understanding of how the concepts elucidated in these models were relevant to understanding the experiences of first generation African American students attending selective institutions of higher education [see Table 2.1].

**Table 2.1**

*Framework for the Study*

Models/Concepts	Elements Examined	Examples of Concepts of Interest
Astin's (1993) IEO College Impact Model	Inputs	Demographics (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, parent education) Precollege academic performance
	Environment	Institutional history Campus climate (race, class, gender) Classroom experiences (w/faculty; peers) Social experiences (w/peers)
	Outputs	Academic performance, student engagement Psychological sense of self
Padilla's (1997) Local Model of Minority Student Success	Theoretical Knowledge	Academic performance
	Heuristic Knowledge	Campus specific knowledge
	Barriers: Transition from high school to college	Campus climate (race, class, gender)
	Lack of nurturing	Relationships with family Relationships with peers; members of the campus community
Cultural Capital	Tastes and Attitudes	Self-efficacy Structural Diversity
		Relationships with peers; members of the campus community
Social Capital	Access to Networks	Cultural knowledge Beliefs about higher education Relationships with members of the campus community

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that students' academic and social experiences in college are influenced by their demographic background (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender) and precollege academic experiences. Their college experiences are also a result of the various interactions between the student and their environment, and thus investigating the institutional context (e.g., a selective, PWI) is important for understanding the perceptions of academic and social experiences. Moreover, these models suggest that gaining campus specific or heuristic knowledge is as important to student success as theoretical knowledge, and thus understanding how students learn to navigate a specific campus would be an important factor to learn. Finally, these models suggest that students learn how to navigate college environments by engaging with others who possess the cultural and social capital valued within the campus community.

### **Review of the Literature**

**College Access and Choice.** Studies exploring college access and college choice decisions for African American students oftentimes begin with an examination of students' family background and precollege experiences. In these studies, several factors including family influence, academic preparation, and access to information about college have been identified as being critical for enabling students to successfully enroll in college. Additionally, precollege outreach programs have been credited with providing support and information necessary for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds to access higher education.

**Family influence.** Family has been shown to be highly influential in shaping college-going aspirations and actions, particularly for minority and first generation

college students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; London, 1989; Rendon, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a). Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) discuss the importance of parents and their role as motivators and encouragers for their children. Parental involvement, especially around academic plans in middle and high school, increases the likelihood of meeting the minimum college qualification across all student groups (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). Although not often discussed in the family literature, siblings are also influential in students' college-going decisions. Growing up in the same homes and attending the same schools, siblings potentially exert a great deal of influence on one another and on the development and actualization of college going plans (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Sanders & Campling, 2004; Tucker, Barber & Eccles, 1997).

From the literature, there is also evidence that family can play a negative or limiting role in students' decisions whether and where to attend college (Bergerson, 2007; Turley, 2006). Parents who did not attend college are not as informed of the college choice process and consequently are less likely to stress strong academic performance as an important prerequisite to enrollment in a four-year college or university (Choy, 2001; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Turley, 2006). Additionally, parents who have not gone to college oftentimes have limited information about the college admissions and financial aid process and policies impacting admission. This necessitates that their children learn the processes for themselves or rely heavily on school personnel for this information (Berger, 2000, Choy, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; McPherson & Schapiro, 2002; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell & Perna, 2008). For those who are

able to attend college, studies of first generation and minority college students found that parents may constrain students' college choice, insisting that they stay closer to home rather than going "away" for college (Turley, 2006). Difficulty managing home and school expectations and responsibilities can contribute to decisions to delay college enrollment, attend on a part-time basis, or take off semesters of study (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bergerson, 2007; Cabrera, et al., 2005; Guiffrida, 2005). Each of these patterns of matriculation decreases the likelihood that individuals will eventually obtain a bachelors degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006).

*Academic preparation.* Middle and high school academic achievement and academic preparation for college are important indicators of college enrollment and persistence (Charles et al., 2009; Fischer, 2007; Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2006; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2005). According to Perna (2005), rigorous academic preparation is the key determinant for college access as well as college persistence. Students with high grade point averages (GPAs) during high school and competitive standardized test scores are more likely to graduate from college, regardless of their socioeconomic status (Cabrera et al., 2005; Ishitani, 2006). The quality of middle/high school curriculum is linked to the quality of school infrastructure, as well as the availability of educational enrichment opportunities outside of school. Consequently, the availability and rigor of the courses students take is constrained by school context (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Perna, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

Within schools, teachers have the potential to dramatically influence the attitudes that students have about education. First, through the classroom interaction and academic content, teachers have the opportunity to take challenging subject matter and make it



accessible through collaborative learning practices and hands-on activities (Cabrera, et. al, 2002). This builds academic competence, as well as confidence in students' academic skills (Cobb, 2004). School counselors also play an important role in shaping educational opportunities for students. Counselors in charge of scheduling, for instance, are able to make determinations about class offering which may support the college-prep processes of students (McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008). Furthermore, through college counseling, counselors can help students make connections early in high school between their academic track and the various college majors available to them (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna et al., 2008). College counselors can help students throughout the college choice process, using their interests and competencies to guide students' search process, and potentially serving as important advocates for students' decisions to attend college in general and selective institutions in particular (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997). Unfortunately, the overextension of high school counselors limits their ability to make these connections on behalf of students, particularly in high-need, low-resource schools (McDonough, 1997; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

***Precollege outreach.*** For students attending lower-quality schools, the academic preparation that they may not be receiving in school can be found through participation in precollege outreach activities that emphasize academic achievement and expose students to information about the college choice process (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Perna & Swail, 2002). Precollege outreach activities may be effective strategies for encouraging young African American students to explore their academic and career interests. Outreach activities that have been identified as being critical for college enrollment and postsecondary success include: (1) academic skill development and preparation; (2)

counseling and guidance throughout the college choice process; (3) deliberate parental involvement, and (4) precollege exposure to campus environments (Perna & Swail, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). Taken together, these elements can help increase students' educational aspirations, academic confidence and academic preparedness, and equip students with explicit strategies to help them anticipate and adjust to the academic and social demands of college. Villalpando and Solórzano (2005) stress that precollege outreach activities are most effective with minority students when they incorporate the students' cultural identity. Having a strong cultural identity can be an important empowering strategy that may help students negotiate the college campus, particularly when attending a PWI where students could be experiencing the differing cultural norms therein for the first time (Charles et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2004; DiMaggio, 1982; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Fordham, 2008; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005).

**African Americans in Higher Education.** Historically, African Americans were limited in their educational opportunities by practice and law (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Before the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, African American college students were largely excluded from PWIs, and nearly all Black students pursuing postsecondary education attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Gasman, 2008). Several studies have explored the academic and social experiences of African American students attending PWIs (e.g. Allen, 1992; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Davis et al., 2004; Douglas, 1998; Flowers, 2004; Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Harper, 2006; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Haussman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Massey et

al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2013; Walpole, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b). Next, I explore some of these studies, focusing when available on the African Americans attending selective institutions of higher education.

*African Americans attending predominantly White institutions.* The transition from high school to college for minority youth may be particularly challenging for students entering a campus environment that is predominantly White. For some students who were raised in predominantly minority communities, attending a PWI triggers a culture shock where it is their first experience in a community that is racially/ethnically different from their own (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Douglas (1998) describes ten African American first-year students' impressions of a public PWI in the Midwest. Participants described their institution as being "big" and "overwhelming" and were acutely aware of the prevalence of voluntary racial/ethnic separation on campus. They also described how they felt disconnected from their home communities and consciously aware of their race on campus, as one student commented, "I wear my skin color – with a magnifying glass" (p. 422). While students held these negative perceptions of campus, they also commented on the campus' physical beauty, sense of tradition on campus, and discussed the opportunities afforded them by attending such a "prestigious" institution.

Consistent with these findings, Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Kulkken, Pollio, Thomas, and Thompson (2004) capture the essence of being a minority student on a predominantly White campus with the phrase "I'm the only fly in the buttermilk." Students attending a large land-grant university in the southeast reported both positive and negative experiences on campus, often at the extremes. Reflecting this sentiment,

one student commented, “Either I am invisible or I am its opposite – I am supervisible” (p. 436). Within this context, the Black students in the study shared that they had to be the ones to actively initiate interaction with members of the campus community and were constantly fighting to prove their worth both academically as a student, and socially as a friend.

Perceptions of a negative or hostile racial campus climate may leave students reluctant to engage with diverse members of the campus community (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Solórzano et al., 2001). Studies have found that these negative perceptions of campus racial climate may in fact account for the observed differences in educational attainment rates between African American and other racial/ethnic groups by negatively impacting students’ academic performance and institutional persistence (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Charles et al., 2009; Fleming 1984; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Cabrera and Nora’s (1994) quantitative study of 879 students entering a public, Midwestern university in the fall of 1990 found that African Americans were significantly more likely than their White peers to perceive prejudices and discrimination on campus. They also found a high correlation among African Americans between racial campus climate experiences and perceptions of prejudiced attitudes of faculty and staff. In a later study, Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn (1999) found that perceptions of prejudice and discrimination had the largest negative effect on African Americans’ academic experiences, and that the social experiences of African Americans were negatively dominated by perceptions of prejudice.

Bean and Eaton (2000) conclude that students who persist in college adopt the attitude that they fit within the campus environment, and embody certain attitudes and behaviors that increase the likelihood of their persistence. These attitudes and behaviors contribute to a personal sense of belonging on campus (Hausman et al., 2007; Ostrove, 2003). Locks, Hurtado, Bowan, & Oseguera (2008) draw from a national multi-institution research project (see Hurtado, 2003) to assess students' sense of belonging on campus. Their study found that although students of color had greater precollege exposure to diverse peers, they perceived more racial tension on campus in comparison to their White peers. Across racial/ethnic groups, all students who had frequent positive interactions with diverse peers had a higher sense of belonging in the second year of college.

Scholars note however that African Americans are influenced or even pressured to modify their behaviors in order to adapt to and fit in within their surrounding environment, or "code-switch" to fit in with White peers on campus (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Padilla et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a). Some students in fact actively resist these behaviors through self-segregation or seeking out members of their own racial community to affiliate with on campus. Feagin and Sikes (1995) frame these behaviors as coping mechanisms, allowing students to insulate themselves from these pervasive forms of institutionalized racism (Harper, 2013). Ethnic-specific social and pre-professional organizations create a social enclave for students, and in a sense shrink the social world of the university at large. This helps students minimize feelings of isolation and alienation that comes from being a minority student on a majority campus (Allen, 1992; Davis et al., 2004; Douglas, 1998; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Fries-Britt &

Turner, 2002). While these enclaves may protect students in some ways, it can also limit opportunities for students to engage with the dominant peer groups, who often are extremely influential on campus and potential sources for networking and other prime opportunities (Strange & Banning, 2001; Tinto, 1993). At selective institutions, these dominant groups include eating clubs, fraternities and sororities, and honors societies. Research also supports the importance of minority students maintaining connections with members of their home community, especially with their parents (Charles et. al, 2009). These individuals – family members, parents, siblings, and peers, were also critical influences during the college choice process (McDonough, 1997) and with their support, can help affirm students’ cultural identity as they transition into college and adulthood (Guiffrida, 2005; London, 1989; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a).

While much can be learned from these examples, it should be noted that previous studies exploring the experiences of students in higher education by-in-large consider “African Americans” as a monolithic group. Within the African American student population, college enrollment patterns and degree attainment rates vary by several factors, including students’ ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and gender. Furthermore, when we investigate the educational experiences of African American students by ethnicity, SES, gender, and academic ability, we see how these distinct social identities interact with one another to influence the ways that students not only engage within the selective collegiate environment, but their outcomes within these environments as well. The literature exploring the experiences of African American college students by these background characteristics is briefly reviewed next.

***Race and ethnicity.*** Studies that explicitly explore the experiences of African Americans attending selective college and universities mirror the themes of minority students attending PWIs in general; students experience a sense of alienation, isolation, and a chilly racial campus climate at these institutions (Charles et al., 2009; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Solórzano et al., 2001). Moreover, African American students often feel they need to prove themselves as academically capable students worthy of attending such prestigious institutions (Berger, 2000; Harris, Palmer, & Strauve, 2011; Jackson, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2001). Historically, some minority students began enrolling at these institutions due to “affirmative action” policies aimed at increasing student representation by gender and race/ethnicity (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Chang et al., 2005; Fischer & Massey, 2007). Fischer and Massey (2007) found that minority students who benefited from campus affirmative action policies earned higher grades and left school at lower rates than students at other types of institutions, and were as satisfied with college life as their White peers. These scholars also found however, that affirmative action policies stigmatized Black students, which compromised their individual academic performance and their psychological sense of well-being. This is phenomenon referred to as *stereotype threat* or the state of “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, and Pietrzak’s (2002) quantitative study of students attending a mid-size selective university found that membership in a devalued group (e.g., racial minority group) led individuals to readily perceive and intensely react to status-based rejection. They found that positive experiences on campus can mitigate

these expectations and over time, increasing feelings of belonging for minority students on campus.

Racial representation at selective institutions has been an issue of concern in the media. Some argue that more selective institutions of higher education are favoring admission of immigrant-born Black students over African Americans who are decedents of slaves (Massey et al., 2007). These claims have led to increased interest in understanding the representation of *Black* students by ethnicity and nationality in higher education. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF), Massey, Mooney, Torres, and Charles (2007) investigated the college experiences of Black immigrants and natives born Black students attending selective colleges and universities in the United States. The authors found that while there were no significant differences between the two groups in most indicators of socioeconomic status, social preparation (e.g. the types of precollege interaction with diverse peers), psychological readiness, and academic preparation, immigrants were over-represented in enrollment at private and more selective institutions of higher education. From their findings, the authors suggest that Black immigrant students may exhibit other intangible traits that advantage them in the admissions process. Specifically looking at the college choice process, Griffin, del Pilar, McIntosh, and Griffin's (2012) study of Black immigrant students attending a public, selective research university suggest that these students' families place a high value on education, and as a result, encouraged students to apply to the best institutions possible despite their socioeconomic background. These findings suggest that Black immigrant students are more likely to apply to selective universities as compared to native-born Blacks, which contributes to the growing diversity of the Black



population on college campuses. Given these trends, there is a small and growing body of research within the higher education literature which explores ethnic differences within the African American college student population, and the similarities and differences in collegiate experiences of native-born Black students as compared to their immigrant Black peers (see Massey et al., 2007).

*First generation college students.* Although the numbers of first generation college students pursuing post-secondary education has grown over time, these students are more likely to attend 2-year institutions of higher education (Choy, 2001; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Data from the 1995-1996 Beginning Postsecondary Study show that first generation college students comprise 47 percent of all entering college students, but are overrepresented among students at less-than-two year, and two-year institutions (Choy, 2001). Of those first generation students who do attend 4-year institutions, they are more likely to leave (29 versus 13 percent) and less likely to earn a degree (47 versus 78 percent) compared to students whose parents had earned a college degree (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Other studies (e.g. Engle et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) have examined the persistence patterns of this student population, mostly focusing on 4-year institutions. Ishitani (2006) for example investigated the longitudinal persistence behavior of first generation college students and their graduation rates at 4-year institutions. He found that students with higher academic skills, and who graduated high school with a higher intensity academic experience, were more likely to persist to graduation. He also found that financial aid in the form of work-study had a positive effect on retention, and a positive impact on fourth-year graduation behavior. Lohfink

and Paulsen's (2005) study compared the determinants of first-to-second year persistence for 1,167 first-generation and 3,017 continuing-generation students at four-year institutions. One finding was that first-generation college students attending private institutions were 12.3% *less* likely to persist than their peers. The scholars suggest that private institutions, although oftentimes smaller with a vast amount of resources, may not be optimally enhancing persistence for first-generation college students due to their cost as well as the challenges associated with interacting with more affluent peers. They suggest "attending college among wealthier peers at private institutions might burden FGS with the tasks of "living up to the Jones" making college more difficult and expensive" (p. 419). Furthermore, the scholars suggest that "forcing" lower-income and minority first-generation college students to live on campus may in fact lead them to become disconnected with their family support networks and native cultures.

Attending college in general, and an elite college in particular, marks a considerable transition for first generation college students. London's (1989) study of the relationships between first generation college students and their family after attending college demonstrated that students experienced pronounced feelings of difference on campus and often find it difficult to articulate these feelings and share their new experiences with members of their home community. One participant in the study, reflecting on their experience in college, shared: "It's like living in a totally different world." Winkle-Wagner (2009a) examined the tensions experienced by African American women while living up to the expectations of campus and the expectations of home. From her ethnographic study of women attending a large, public, predominantly White institution a powerful theme of *homelessness* emerged. It was "as if they (the

women in the study) fit neither on campus nor at home” (p. 9). Participants described the difficulty they experiencing adjusting to the campus environment, and how at times they felt isolated from the larger campus community due to their race and gender. On the other hand, they felt that their time in college and their experiences on campus experiences changed them too much to truly fit in within their home communities as they once did. While students were motivated by their families to do well academically, the pressure to succeed was also a great source of distress.

*Socioeconomic status (SES).* Understanding how SES shapes the educational experiences of underrepresented minorities has increasingly been explored by higher education scholars (e.g., Berger, 2000; Bergerson, 2007; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; 2010; Walpole, 2003; 2008). Compared to their more affluent peers, students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to be members of traditionally underrepresented minority groups (e.g., African American, Latino, or Native American) (Walpole, 2008), and have parents who have not attended college (Berger, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Moreover, students from lower SES backgrounds often have limited financial resources to pay for college (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Given the historical linkages between SES and race, some scholars (e.g. Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Perna, 2006; St. John, Paulsen & Starkey, 1996) argue that the representation of African Americans at selective institutions of higher education is constrained primarily by the availability of financial resources, as well as access to information about how to finance higher education.

The availability of financial resources influences college choice decisions as well as persistence patterns in higher education. Over the past ten years, there has been a

decrease in the availability of federal and institutional aid in the forms of grants and an increase in the use of federal and private loans to pay for college (College Board, 2008). For lower-income students, concerns about cost contributes to decisions to attend community colleges, pursue higher education on a part-time basis or forgo higher education altogether for opportunities in the workforce (Brenamen & Merisotis, 2002; McPherson & Schapiro, 2002). Once students do enroll in post-secondary programs, changes in financial aid packages may necessitate students to seek out additional funding opportunities through part-time or full-time employment (Perna, 2010). Charles et al. (2009) found that in comparison to White and Asians, African American students at selective universities were more likely to perceived working to be of greater importance and hold jobs during their first year of college. This was to accommodate students' personal needs, as well as financial obligations to their families. Other studies have found that students who take on debt through loans and who work through college are more likely to feel stress which may affect their ability to fully engage in college life academically and/or socially (Bergerson, 2007; Fischer, 2007; McPherson & Schapiro, 2002). These trends have negative implications for student persistence in college.

*Social class.* Selective colleges and universities, long criticized for being elitist and exclusionary (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gándara, 1995) have increasingly sought out academically talented youth from lower-income backgrounds to attend their campuses (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Mullen, 2009). Equipped with the financial support necessary to cover the tuition and fees for these institutions, the assumption is that given the opportunity to attend, these students will flourish academically and socially (Avery, Hoxby, Jackson, Burek, & Poppe, 2006; Dale &

Krueger, 1999; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Small & Winship, 2007). The research that explores the impact of social class on the college experiences of students at selective institutions, however, paints a different picture. Within selective PWIs, issues around class status can be acute for students, particularly those from low-income and/or working class backgrounds. Ostrove and Long (2007) surveyed 322 students enrolled at a small, selective, liberal arts college in the Midwest, and found that class background was significantly related to participants' sense of belonging at, and adjustment to college, both academically and socially. Compared to their peers from poor or working class backgrounds, students from higher social classes were better adjusted to college, reported a higher quality of their college experience, and were less concerned about financial matters. Aries and Seider (2005) interviewed 30 lower income students, 15 from an elite college and 15 from a state college. Significant disparities of wealth between students at the elite college heightened students' awareness of social class distinctions and led to feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, deficiency, exclusion, and powerlessness among lower income students. These feelings were less prevalent among lower-income students attending the state college. Although students at both colleges acquired new forms of cultural capital and coped with class-based discontinuities between who they were before college and who they were becoming, these issues were heightened for the lower-income students attending the elite college.

***Gender.*** In regards to gender and college persistence, the gaps between the participation and degree completion rates of African American women and African American men have widened overtime. The majority of African Americans attending college are women, representing over 60% of the African American college student

population (NCES, 2010c). The growing gap in enrollment and persistence between these groups has contributed to a focus of scholarship on gender differences and the college experience (e.g. Allan & Madden, 2006; Fleming, 1984; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Harris, Palmer, & Strave, 2011; Jackson, 1998; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a). This body of research reveals that while there are some commonalities in experiences, women and men do indeed experience college differently in terms of the nature of their campus engagement, interactions with faculty and staff, and perceptions of campus climate. These differences vary across institutional contexts (e.g. public, private, academic department), and have implications for students' ability to find their niche within the academic and social spaces of campus.

Allan and Madden (2006) uses the concept of gender privilege to focus attention on the often invisible or subtle ways in which differential treatment by gender can operate to disadvantage women and advantage men in the classroom. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, they found that women, particularly those enrolled in male-majority fields such as accounting and engineering, reported experiencing various forms of discouragement by faculty, felt invisible and marginalized within the academic spaces on campus, and at times felt judged by their attractiveness and sexuality. Jackson's (1998) study on the influence of race and gender on the experiences of African American college women provides rationale for the renewed investigation of these students' lives. An emergent theme of *struggle* in her study involved feelings of "being oppressed, having to work harder than others [e.g. White students, male students] to be successful, having to constantly prove oneself to others, not being able to complain, fighting negative stereotypes, and fighting battles against racism and discrimination" (p. 366). Struggling

with these oftentimes non-academic issues negatively impacted students' academic performance and sense of belonging on campus.

*Academic ability.* Scholars have found that having a strong academic foundation can often trump other non-cognitive factors (e.g. SES, race/ethnicity) that may contribute to the attrition of students (Allen, 1992; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Perna, 2005; Tinto, 1993). This academic foundation stems from students' middle and high school experiences and exposure to academic rigor, opportunities to complete advanced math and science courses, their overall academic performance (e.g., high school G.P.A., high school class rank), and their performance on standardized tests (e.g. SAT and ACT) (Cabrera et al., 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Perna, 2005). Regardless of the measurement tool used, there is a longstanding notion that students who are “academically talented” are more likely to persist in college and thus have better odds at succeeding in higher education across all institutional types. Consequently, some feel that high achieving students are without need for any additional support services in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Freeman, 1999). Yet, scholars who study the collegiate experiences of academically talented and high achieving African American students note that these students encounter a number of challenges that impact their ability to successfully engage themselves in the academic and social fabric of campus life, often finding difficulty integrating their social, racial, and academic identities as they transition from high school to college (Fries-Britt; 1998). These experiences can potentially hinder students' ability to focus on their academic endeavors and overtime may diminish their motivation for college (Griffin, 2006). To combat these potential barriers to success, scholars have discussed the important role that support structures such as participation in

campus resources and engagement with peers play in helping high achieving students successfully adjust to and persist in college (Bonner, 2010; Fries-Britt, 1998; Griffin, 2006). In addition to these support structures, studies have also sought a better understanding of the internal motivation that pushes students to continue to “strive for academic excellence and pursue their goals despite these challenges” (Griffin, 2006, p. 385).

### **Summary of Literature Review**

This chapter synthesizes some of the existing literature on African American and first generation college students, and students attending selective institutions of higher education. The research on the barriers to college persistence, particularly for first generation, low-income and minority students, is extensive. Difficulties finding adequate academic and social supports linked to student persistence such as involvement in extracurricular activities (Astin, 1993; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994) or faculty mentoring (Freeman, 1999; Walpole, 2008), may lead to premature departure from their institution. Lack of structural diversity (the presence of other minority students and staff on campus) contributes to feelings of isolation and alienation on the campus (Padilla et al., 1997; Pike & Kuh, 2005). These feelings may be more pronounced for African Americans within the context of selective PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fischer, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Solórzano et al., 2001). Moreover, not having the support of family (Bergerson, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b) and peers (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002) makes it challenging for students to focus on their educational goals and persist beyond their first year (Padilla et al., 1997).



From this literature, it is clear that there are various potential obstacles to college persistence for African American, first generation college students. Given all of these potential obstacles, it is difficult to figure out what exactly should be done: which interventions would be most helpful to mitigate the barriers to educational attainment? Much can be learned from the strategies used by African American, first generation college students who are persisting within various types of institutions of higher education, especially selective institutions. Are there specific strategies necessary to make it in a selective institution of higher education? Moreover, given that selective institutions are predominantly White and affluent, how do African American, first generation college students experience this new environment? This study investigates these questions by examining the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college women who attend a selective, predominantly White university. In Chapter 3, I describe my research methods, as I attempt to gain a better understanding of this population and their collegiate experiences.



### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students who attend a selective institution of higher education. The research questions guiding this study were:

- 1) How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 2) How do African American, first generation college students describe their social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 3) How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence?

In this chapter, I begin by describing the study's design, qualitative research, and my selected strategies of inquiry, case study methodology. Next, I describe the research context, a highly selective, predominantly White university, and the rationale for selecting the University of Pennsylvania as my research site. This is followed by a description of the data collection processes, data analysis techniques, and reporting procedures. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of trustworthiness, reliability, and the limitations of this methodology.

#### **Design of the Study: Qualitative Research**

This study employed qualitative research methods. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research methods are appropriate when the researcher is interested in focusing on meaning in context. Following the social constructivist worldview, I believe that the

meaning we make of our experiences, or our *reality*, is a reflection of the social, historical, and cultural context in which our experiences occur (Brodio & Manning, 2002; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research approaches are consistent with this epistemological framework. Broido and Manning (2002) summarized four themes that shape the social constructivist paradigm: (1) the researcher-participant relationship is subjective and interactive; (2) realities are multiple and complex; (3) the values of the researcher, participants, setting, and theory influence all aspects of the research process; and (4) interpretations of the research are context specific. Consequently, these themes influenced all of the methodological decisions made throughout the research process: the selection of my topic, data collection, analysis procedures, and the reporting of findings.

Qualitative research approaches are also useful when one is interested in exploring emergent patterns and themes that may come from the study. Unlike quantitative research which tests objective theories by deductively examining the relationships between a set of pre-determined variables, the qualitative research design is inductive, and allowed me to be open to new information that is not presently documented in the literature pertaining to students' experiences attending selective institutions of higher education (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). This is particularly useful when investigating a specific phenomenon of which little is known, or when there are few available conceptual frameworks from which to build understanding (Yin, 2003). As the specific topic of the collegiate experiences of first generation, minority college students at highly selective institutions is limited, the findings from this study adds to the literature in this area (Aries & Seider, 2005; Charles et al., 2009).

**Case Study Methodology.** There are several design approaches within the qualitative research paradigm. This study followed an interpretive, multiple case study design to present a detailed illustration of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college women who attend a selective institution of higher education. Case study as a methodology is a qualitative approach in which the researcher provides an in-depth analysis of a *bounded system* over-time by collecting multiple sources of data by way of observations, interviews, or document analysis (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman; 2005). This information is then reported as a description of a *case*. In this study, each participant is a case, bounded by her experiences within the context of the University of Pennsylvania, a selective institution of higher education. In bounding the cases in this manner, each student's social, cultural, and personal experiences are not simply described, but can be understood in relation to the interactions that each individual have encountered over time. Additionally, cross-case analysis was used to understand commonalities and differences across participants' experiences within this institutional context.

Interpretive case studies are used to develop new conceptual categories, or to illustrate, support, expand, or challenge existing theoretical assumptions held about a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). While descriptive case studies present a thick, rich description of a phenomenon, interpretive case studies are highly analytical in nature, inductive, complex, and in-depth. Thus, my data gathering and analysis was completed in ways that further complicates what we know about the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students in general, and

specifically African American, first generation college women within the context of a selective institution of higher education.

### **Summary of Case Study Methodology**

Qualitative methodology is an appropriate technique when “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection; the [data analysis] process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). This study conforms to each of the aforementioned criteria. First, this study is focused on the meanings students make of their educational experiences through the lens of their social identities, cultural background, and interactions with others. This allows for an understanding of how people make sense of their lives rather than focusing solely on the outcomes of their experiences. Second, I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. I personally conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants and was attuned to both verbal and nonverbal communication during these interactions. I also engaged in the analysis process, aware of my inherent biases and its potential impact on the study, and monitored these biases through memoing, journaling, member checking, and working with peer reviewers. Third, while guided by a conceptual framework, literature review, and research questions, the analysis of the data followed an inductive process, whereby I was open to the uncovering of themes outside the scope of the conceptual framework to emerge from the data. Finally, the reported findings were highly descriptive in nature, including a rich/thick description of each individual participant, as well as the themes that cut across cases. Evidence of this data is summarized in descriptive tables and reported

as individual case profiles highlighting the voices of the participants themselves as quotes where appropriate.

## **Research Site**

**Rationale for Site Selection.** I was interested in exploring the experiences of a specific population of students (African American, first generation college students) within the selective campus context. Consequently, purposeful sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007) were used to identify potential sites for this study. First, I consulted the literature to identify previous studies that focused on selective institutions of higher education. The National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen is a nationwide survey of students who entered 28 selective colleges and universities (both public and private) in the fall of 1999 (see Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2006). These institutions served as my initial list of potential sites. Since previous studies have not clearly differentiated the experiences of minority students by public or private institution within the selective context (see Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Small & Winship, 2007), I was specifically interested in exploring the private university context, narrowing the potential list of institutions to 14. I then followed convenience sampling to identify a sample set of institutions that was reasonably close to me geographically and had available participants for my study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Consequently, I created a list of four potential institutions: Columbia University (New York, NY), Georgetown University (Washington, DC), Princeton University (Princeton, NJ), and the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA). After consultation with my advisor and dissertation committee, the University of Pennsylvania was selected as my research site.

Several considerations confirmed the appropriateness of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) for this study. First, this private institution met the criterion of a “selective” institution, which is the focus of the investigation. Of the 31,218 new freshmen applicants for the 2012-2013 academic year, only 12.6% were admitted. This is down from 14% admitted during the 2011-2012 academic year. Second, informational interviews with members of the campus community provided evidence that there would be a sufficient number of students who meet my criteria at this institution who could potentially participate in this study. Further, from my previously established connections with key informants on campus, I was offered support to help facilitate the recruitment of eligible participants for this study. Finally, given my proximity to this institution, it was relatively convenient to travel to the campus to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with each participant and observe the campus programs and activities.

**About the Site.** Penn is a private, residential college located in the urban setting of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2010) classified this institution as a “Research University–Very High.” According to institutional data publically available via the University of Pennsylvania’s website, as of Fall 2012, the campus educates approximately 10,300 full-time undergraduate students. Ninety-four percent of the freshman class was in the top 10% of their high school graduating class. Of those accepted for admission to the Class of 2016, 40% are black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American. Per a Fall 2011 report, the total full-time undergraduate enrollment of African American/Black students is 7.1%. Last



reported in 2010, the mean six-year<sup>3</sup> graduation rate for African American/Black undergraduates at this institution was 92.6% for females and 89% for males compared to 95.5% for the overall student body (collegeresults.org). The cost for tuition and fees for 2012-2013 was \$43,738. Approximately 13% of freshmen were Federal Pell-Grant recipients, while 9% of the overall undergraduate population was Pell-Grant recipients.

Founded in 1789, Penn is one of the oldest and most selective institutions of higher education in the United States. The institution exclusively educated White men until 1876 and formally enrolled African American men in 1879. In 1967, Penn adopted an “Admissions Policy for the Undergraduate Schools of the University of Pennsylvania” as an effort to increase the recruitment, retention, and promotion of minority students, faculty, administrators, and trustees. By 1972, an official Minority Recruitment Program was created to deliberately recruit African American students to attend Penn. In the decades following these initiatives, the university sanctioned the creation of student organizations and courses relevant to the African American student experience.

Under the leadership of President Amy Gutman (2004-Present), Penn has committed to expanding the socioeconomic diversity of the institution by “making a world-class education attainable to all talented and hardworking students, regardless of their economic circumstances” (Penn Compact, 2004). To that end, Penn has expanded its need-based financial aid program and currently awards no-loan financial aid packages to all undergraduate students with demonstrated financial need. This financial aid policy

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<sup>3</sup>Last reported in 2010, the mean four-year graduation rate for African American/Black undergraduates at this institution was 86.4 percent for females and 78 percent for males compared to 88.6 percent for the overall student body (collegeresults.org).

has resulted in an increase in the number of applications received from candidates from low and middle-income families since the policy's inception in 2004.

Penn offers a number of programs and services to specifically support traditionally underrepresented student populations both academically and socially. Each of the four undergraduate schools within the university: the School of Arts and Sciences, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, the School of Nursing, and the Wharton School of Business, has an Office of Multicultural Affairs dedicated to advising and supporting women and students of color within their respective academic majors. Moreover, the campus sponsors several support programs and activities to facilitate the transition of new students to the college environment and academic expectations at Penn. These programs and activities include the Multicultural Scholars Preview Program, a Spring overnight program for admitted students from diverse backgrounds; the Center for Africana Studies Summer Institute for Pre-Freshman (Africana), an intensive one-week course of study designed to expose students to intellectual and cultural themes in African and African Diaspora studies; the Pre-Freshman Program (PFP), a four-week academic summer experience for newly admitted students; the Pennsylvania College Achievement Program (PENNCAP), which offers comprehensive student support services including academic enrichment, cultural activities, tutoring, and counseling support for academically talented students, many from low-income or first-generation backgrounds; and the Ronald B. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair), a federally funded TRIO program that prepares eligible (low-income and first generation or members of racial/ethnic groups underrepresented in graduate education) students for graduate studies leading to a Ph.D. Penn is also a partner with QuestBridge, a nonprofit

organization that recruits and supports motivated, high-achieving, low-income students to and through college (QuestBridge, 2012), and the POSSE Foundation, a college access and leadership development program that places cohorts of talented students at partner colleges and universities (POSSE Foundation, 2012).

In addition to these programs, Penn also houses several cultural centers that serve as “homes for communities organized around race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality” (University of Pennsylvania, 2012). The Makuu: Black Cultural Center, for example, was founded in 2000 to serve as a cultural resource center for those interested in Black culture. The center also serves as the hub for Umoja, an umbrella group composed of all black student organizations. Celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary during the 2012-2013 academic year, the W.E.B. Dubois College House opened in 1972 as a response to the needs voiced by African American students who wanted an African American theme-based house. The smallest of the eleven College Houses at Penn, Dubois College House attempts to cultivate a strong sense of community through events and programs. Today, the Dubois College House is one of the most diverse college houses on campus.

### **Sample Selection**

I used purposeful sampling techniques to select participants to secure information rich cases. Purposeful sampling is “based upon the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). I interviewed 5 students for this study. Each participant met the specified criteria for inclusion in the study: at least 18 years of age and, (1) self-identify as African American or Black, (2) a first generation

college student (defined as neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree), and (3) a junior or senior at Penn. The rationale for these criteria is described below.

**Criterion 1: African American or Black.** I selected African Americans as the population of interest because they represent a small share of students enrolled at selective institutions of higher education (Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2006).

According to institutional data, 735 of the 9,865 undergraduates enrolled at Penn self-identified as African American/Black, representing 7% of the undergraduate population (University of Pennsylvania, 2011).

**Criterion 2: First Generation College Student.** Historically, first generation college students are less likely to enroll in selective institutions of higher education and persist to graduation (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Carnevale & Rose, 2004). While statistics related to the numbers of first generation college students at Penn has not been consistently collected over time, it was reported that first generation college students represent 18% of the overall campus population as of Fall 2012 (Penn Admissions, 2012). The specific number of first generation African American students at Penn was not available via the Office of Admissions.

**Criterion 3: Junior or Senior at Penn.** This study examines the academic and social experiences of students on campus. The study specifically focused on the experiences of upperclassman, students entering their third or fourth year of college. Given their longer time at Penn, they arguably have had more experiences interacting with the campus environment (Astin, 1993) and hold greater institutional or heuristic knowledge relative to the campus (Padilla et al., 1997). These students provide a valuable perspective on what it takes to persist within the selective campus environment,

in contrast to much of the available literature on African American or first generation college students where the focus is on the experiences of first and second year students (e.g. Charles et al., 2009; Padilla et al., 1997).

**Participant Recruitment.** Prior to beginning the study, I met with several administrators at Penn to confirm the appropriateness of completing this research on campus. Initial meetings with these administrators were held during the Spring 2012 semester. First I met with staff members from the Office of Equity and Access Programs, who work with racial/ethnic minority students, first generation college students, and students from lower-income families. I also made contact with the Directors of the Office of Multicultural Affairs from two of the four undergraduate schools. During these initial meetings, I was successful in my efforts to gain permission to contact the African American, first generation college students affiliated with their offices. I composed an email, which was sent through these campus contacts to students who met the criteria of my study [see Appendix A]. This message included a general description of the project as well as a flier inviting them to participate in the study [see Appendix B]. Given that participation would involve at least two in-person interviews and the availability for follow-up interviews, contacts were informed they would be rewarded with a gift card worth \$25 for participating in the study.

The first round of recruitment emails was sent out May 2012 to approximately 60 students. From these efforts, four students responded, including two students who met the full criteria of the study. These two students subsequently participated. Given the coming ending of the academic year, recruitment was postponed until the following academic year. A second round of emails went out beginning August 2012 and

continued through October 2012, from which 8 students responded, yielding an additional two eligible students. I also engaged in snowball sampling, which involved asking all interested participants to refer me to their contacts who could be eligible to participate in the study (Merriam, 2009). This strategy allowed for the potential of making contact with students who were not affiliated with the initially targeted campus offices. One additional student agreed to participate in the study via this technique, bringing the total to five students. After consultation with my committee, I was cleared to proceed with the study incorporating these five participants. The selection of a small set of students was intentional, allowing for the opportunity to delve more deeply into their individual experiences.

### **Data Collection**

I collected primary data from each participant through a demographic questionnaire and three semi-structured individual interviews. Secondary data consisted of a review of institutional documents and reports and informal observations of campus events and activities. Primary and secondary data were utilized to compile a rich and detailed description of each participant, their academic and social experiences, and to provide a rich context of their perceptions of the educational environment at Penn. These data collection methods are detailed next.

**Demographic Questionnaire.** Each participant was asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire [see Appendix C]. This questionnaire was designed to capture general information about the students' race/ethnicity, parents' highest educational levels, family economic status, high school and college academic performance, and educational aspirations. The purpose of this demographic

questionnaire was to capture background information relevant to the research with minimal imposition on the limited interview time with each participant. This information was also used to assess the students' socioeconomic status on the basis of reported a) students' financial aid eligibility, b) parents' education level, c) parents' occupational status, and d) self-reported class status.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data for the study. Each participant engaged in two individual, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in the Student Union on Penn's campus, and one semi-structured follow up phone interview. Participants were afforded the opportunity to select a pseudonym to be used throughout the study to protect their identity. Those who did not select a pseudonym had one created for them. My semi-structured interview protocol was informed by my conceptual framework and literature review to address a broad range of questions relating to students' collegiate academic and social experiences including students' perceptions of their academic preparation for college, perceptions of campus climate, and their perceptions of their embodied racial, class, and gender identities [see Appendix D]. Table 3.1 is a sample of the interview protocol as they correspond with the research questions and conceptual framework. Specifically, participants were asked a series of questions to allow them to narrate their educational pathway through college, including the role of their families in their educational journeys, concluding with their present day experiences as upper-level college students. When participants referenced specific persons such as a teacher or staff member at Penn, these names were replaced with pseudonym in order to protect the identity of these individuals. With permission of

each participant, interviews were audio recorded and the first two interviews in the series for each participant was professionally transcribed verbatim.

**Table 3.1**

*Sample of Interview Protocol*

Conceptual Framework	Interview Questions
Q1: Background and Precollege Questions	
Inputs: Race/ethnicity, gender, class	1. Please tell me a little about your family [parents, siblings].
Inputs: Race/ethnicity, gender, class	2. Have either of your parents attended college? Siblings attend college?
Inputs: Race/ethnicity, gender, class	3. How does your family view education, the importance of education?
Inputs: Academic Preparation	4. Were there any particular teachers/individuals that made an impact on you from kindergarten – high school?
Inputs: Academic Preparation	5. Have you participated in any college preparatory programs or activities?
Inputs: Academic Preparation	6. What were your high school experiences like academically? Socially?
Q2: How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?	
Environment	7. Reflecting back to your first semester on campus, what were your initial impressions of the institution?
Environment	8. What have your classroom experiences been like in your major?
Outcomes	9. What types of things do you do to maintain good grades in your courses?
Environment	10. Please describe your interactions with faculty, both in and outside of the classroom?
Q3: How do African American, first generation college students describe their social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?	
Environment	11. What has it been like for you socially



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	as an African American student on this campus?
Environment	12. What types of activities and programs have you been involved in?
Outcomes	13. Have you ever had a negative campus experience anything that you attributed to your social identity? (race/ethnicity, class, gender) [followup – Do you know of any instances?]
Input/Environment	14. How often do you return home to visit family and friends? What feelings do you experience while you're home?
Environment	15. Do you feel there are others students "like-you" on this campus that you can go to for support?
Q4: How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence?	
Input/Environment	16. Have there been any moments where you were you thought that this college was not for you and you should leave or transfer?
Outcomes	17. Throughout your college experiences here, what techniques or strategies did you use to navigate the educational environment? (e.g. campus policies, identifying key people on campus)
Environment	18. Throughout your college experience, what types of programs and services were most beneficial to you?
Input/Environment/Outcomes	19. How has attending this university changed you? [academic self; yourself as a first generation student, as a Black person]
Environment/Outcomes	20. Based on your experiences, what do you think it takes to be successful at this university?

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The first round of interviews focused on researcher-participant relationship building and understanding participants' precollege experiences. These initial interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. I began by explaining the purpose of the research

project and provided each participant with a consent form [see Appendix C]. Once any concerns were addressed, each participant was given the demographic questionnaire, and privacy to complete both the consent form and demographic questionnaire.

Subsequently, we began the interview. During the first interview, participants were asked to describe their family's perception of the importance of education, their personal precollege educational experiences in elementary, middle and high school, their college choice process and their initial impressions of Penn's campus.

Within three weeks of the first interview, each participant engaged in a second individual interview on campus, which allowed me to gain clarification on their initial responses and continue the discussion of their academic and social experiences as college students. The second set of interviews, also semi-structured in nature, primarily focused on the experiences of students while on Penn's campus. I asked participants to reflect upon their early experiences on campus, their overall academic and social experiences as a student, their perceptions of the barriers to persistence on campus, and their assessment of the campus climate for students "like themselves" at Penn. The second round interviews ranged between 50 and 80 minutes in length.

After each interview, I engaged in memoing to document my initial reactions, note potential follow-up questions for each participant, and chronicle my initial interpretations, thoughts, and ideas from the interviews (Patton, 2002). As each interview was transcribed professionally, I reviewed the transcripts carefully, updating errors and correcting any "inaudible" notations within the actual text from my copy of the audio recording. I subsequently compiled the information from the interviews along with demographic questionnaire to write a case profile for each participant. The initial draft

case profile was sent to each participant beginning January 2013, providing participants with an opportunity to review the information, check for inaccuracies, and submit comments to clarify ideas using the “track changes” feature in Microsoft Word. This process is referred to as member checking (Patton, 2002).

The third and final round of interviews was scheduled after the data from participants’ first two interviews and demographic questionnaire responses was compiled into draft case profiles. The purpose of the third interview was to allow me to review the individual profile with each participant and provide a space for the participant to expand upon what was captured in the first two interviews. I also asked clarifying questions from the draft case profiles, and included additional questions to tease out students’ perceptions of the campus climate in terms of race, gender, and social class. These interviews were conducted over the phone, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each. This third interview was audio recorded, but not transcribed. The amount of time spent with each participant was as follows: Alysha, 157 minutes, Leila, 167 minutes, Patrice, 111 minutes, Robin 124 minutes, Tatiana, 179 minutes.

**Document Review.** Document review was used as a strategy to gather supplemental information about the campus context. Documents reviewed for this study included Penn’s official fact book, the institutions’ website, the campus newspaper, and publically available enrollment data. These public documents were useful in providing descriptive information about the contemporary and historical nature of campus as well as a general sense of campus culture.

**Informal Observation.** To keep the students’ perception of the campus environment central in this investigation, my observation of the campus was minimal and

informal in nature. Observations occurred while I was waiting for a participant to meet for an interview, or as I was on campus memoing afterwards. I observed a Fall festival held on the campus green, the comings and goings of individuals visiting the Student Union, and the activity within the lobby of a campus residence hall. Observation is a particularly useful technique when one is interested in a first-hand interpretation of a particular context (Adler & Adler, 1998). Using my observation protocol as a guide [see Appendix F] I made descriptive notes of the settings, interpretive notes of the observed behaviors and interactions between individuals in the setting, and recorded reflective notes capturing my thoughts and feelings during the sessions. These observations provided me with a better sense of the current campus context.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of “bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 150). For this study, data were primarily collected in the forms of interviews and a demographic questionnaire to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending a selective university. Data analysis leads to meaning making, and is often reported as findings arranged in the form of descriptive accounts of a persons’ experience and themes that cut across all participants in a given study (Merriam, 2009). My data analysis was completed in several stages. I began by organizing my data into carefully labeled files that were stored as hard copies in my home office and saved electronically. After creating coding categories derived from the conceptual framework and literature review, I drafted individual case profiles for each participant. These profiles were highly descriptive in nature and included information

gathered from students' individual interviews and demographic questionnaire. Next, in reference to the research questions, I engaged in cross-case analysis to identify the prominent themes that cut across participants' experiences. During this process, additional categories were developed for emergent themes not addressed by these research questions or in the initial literature review. NVivo 10, a computer assisted qualitative software package, was utilized to support organizing, coding, and the retrieval of data. Providing an audit trail, or detailed description of how the data was analyzed, ensures reliability. To that end, I outline the specific steps I took to organize, analyze, and report the data collected for this study.

**Step 1: Understanding the Nature of the Data.** After each interview, I completed brief analytic memos to document my initial reactions, note potential follow-up questions for each participant, and chronicle my initial interpretations, thoughts, and ideas from the interviews (Patton, 2002). Memoing allows the researcher to capture “reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and things...to ask, observe, and look for in [my] next round of data collection” (Merriam, 2009, p. 170). This technique allowed me to refine my interview protocol, evaluate the appropriateness of my interview questions in light of my research questions, and gain a better understanding of the nature of the data as the project progressed.

**Step 2: Organizing the Data.** Yin (2003) notes that one difficulty with conducting a case study is that these projects can result in the production of a massive amount of data that can be difficult to organize. Gaining a clear understanding of how to *handle* data is the first step to analysis (Richards, 2009). To address this potential concern, it was important that I followed a system for organizing this information for

easy retrieval and analysis. I began by organizing my data into carefully labeled files that were stored electronically and as hard copies. The first and second round interviews with each participant were transcribed and saved electronically as a Microsoft Word document. These documents were carefully labeled with the participants' pseudonym and the date of and time of the interview. These files were sent electronically to participants for review. Hardcopies of these interviews, along with participants' demographic questionnaire, and my observation notes were kept as files in my home office.

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software saves time and effort by maintaining an organized filing system for my data and analysis (Bazeley, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 2005). After testing out several programs, I decided to use NVivo 10 qualitative software to assist in organizing, coding, and the retrieval of data. Electronic copies of transcripts were imported into NVivo and stored and organized into folders labeled by participant. I also imported my post analytic memos into NVivo by participant. A separate file of "campus specific" information was imported, including informational interview data, notes from documents reviewed, and my observation memos. In addition to NVivo, I also kept a researcher journal to record ideas, interpretations, questions, and concerns about the project throughout the process. These files served as a log of the procedures followed and adjustments made throughout the research process (Richards, 2009).

**Step 3: Developing a Codebook.** A code is simply "a short word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2009). Using my

research questions, conceptual framework, and literature review as a starting point, I identified a set of coding categories to reflect the factors identified as important for understanding the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending a selective university. For each category, I included a definition and provided an example (Miles & Huberman, 2005). Taken together, these coding categories made up my codebook (Saldaña, 2009). Once I completed my codebook, these categories were entered data into NVivo 10 “nodes.” Table 3.2 is a sample of this codebook.

**Table 3.2**

*Excerpt from Codebook*

Coding Category	Definition	Example Response
Parents	Reference to mother, father or guardian	“My mom and my dad don’t always agree about a lot of things, but one thing that my dad realizes, and let[s] my mom handle [is] education...”(Alysha)
Acad beh	Academic behaviors or strategies participants engaged in as college students.	“As I mentioned before coming here I really had to teach myself how to study. Um and even now I still don’t have a full sense of who I am as a studier...” (Tatiana)
Environment	Perceptions of the physical, academic, social, or racial campus environment.	“It’s very big, um but it’s a real campus. I would describe this campus as a real campus. All of our buildings are here and um you can see your friends around here...” (Patrice)
Involvement	Examples of collegiate involvement in academic, pre-professional, or social organizations; employment	“Pretty much all my life I’ve been involved one way or the other with some sort of musical group...” (Robin)

**Step 4: Placing Data into Categories or “Coding”.** Once the initial sets of nodes were created in NVivo, I began with coding. Coding is a “method that enables you to organize and group [similar] data into categories or “families” because they share some characteristic” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). Coding was both deductive (coding of data based on predetermined categories) and inductive (categories emerge from the data) (Merriam, 2009). From the interview transcripts imported into NVivo, I began with deductive coding. The conceptual framework created from the work of Astin (1993), Padilla et al. (1997), and Bourdieu (1986) served as the outline for the initial set of factors considered when interpreting the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending a selective university. These factors were central to the identification of patterns, themes, and categories during deductive coding. As I read each transcript, I highlighted the responses that reflected these coding categories and saved them within NVivo. My inductive coding was a more fluid process and allowed for the identification of themes that were not part of this initial conceptual framework and set of coding categories. Factors outside of the original framework that emerged from the data were considered as “emergent themes,” useful in gaining a better understanding of these students’ experiences. These additional codes were subsequently added to and defined within my codebook.

**Step 5: Within-Case Analysis.** Within-case analysis involves treating each case individually and gaining as much information as possible from that case in and of itself (Merriam, 2009). I wrote individual detailed participant profiles for each of the five participants in the study to convey “a holistic understanding of the case” (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). Referring to the categories saved for each participant, these individual



participant profiles were organized into the following subheadings: *family background, educational background, college choice process, campus environment, academic climate and culture, social climate and culture, returning home, and reflections*. These detailed summaries were intended to provide the reader with a holistic view of each participant's personal background, educational experiences, and share as much as possible about the context in which their experiences occurred.

**Step 6: Cross-Case Analysis.** After the initial individual case profiles were completed, I engaged in cross-case analysis. In this analysis I attempted to address the research questions and “build a general explanation that fits the individual cases” (Yin, 2008 as cited in Merriam, 2009, pg. 204). My cross-case analysis was organized into subsections by my three research questions: *academic experiences, social experiences, and barriers to persistence*. An additional subsection, *emergent themes*, was created to capture the unique themes that did not fit the predetermined research questions. Turning back to NVivo, all of the references for a particular coding category were saved in the individual nodes. These nodes were reviewed to examine the similarities and differences in the ways participants made sense of their experiences. Moreover, I was able to see how many times a code was referenced as well as the percentage of the reference that was coded at any given node. Beginning with participants' direct quotes, I was able to interpret the findings in relation to my conceptual framework and available literature on the topic.

### **Role of the Researcher, Reliability, and Trustworthiness**

**Role of the Researcher.** As human beings our identity, experiences, and values shape who we are, how we view the world, and our interactions with others. These

factors need to be taken into consideration prior to engaging in any research project. To acknowledge the influence of my own biases in this study, it is important that I explain my beliefs, perspectives, and values (Glesne, 2011; Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006). Additionally, I must also share my reasons for engaging in such a study.

This topic has significant meaning for me. I identify as an African American woman and I am a first generation college student. I attended a selective, private university for my undergraduate education. My college experience marked a transformative period in my life, where I had to reassess my identities as a high achiever, an African American, and a woman. Managing these identities was all the more challenging within the context of Syracuse University, a predominantly White institution in New York State. While ultimately I was successful, I experienced a great deal of tension as I worked to regain my academic self-confidence and find the campus supports necessary for my success. I recognize that my personal experiences impact the entire research process, from my selection of participants, the researcher-participant dynamic during interviews, and my interpretation of the data. I entered this project with the assumption that African American, first generation college students would experience some difficulty transitioning from high school to college and learning to navigate the selective collegiate environment.

As a professional, I have dedicated my career to working with minority students as a teacher, counselor, advisor, and mentor. I work with this population because I want to understand their lived experiences and I consider myself an advocate for educational reform to advance the opportunities of this historically disadvantaged group. Prior to beginning graduate study at the University of Maryland, I worked as a counselor for the

TRIO Upward Bound Program, a pre-college preparatory program sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania for two and a half years. In that role, I was able to make contact with several members of the campus community who worked with Penn undergraduate students. I was also a graduate student in higher education at Penn, and I was highly engaged in the academic and social goings-on of graduate campus life. Moreover, my younger sister earned her bachelors' degree at Penn and would often share with me her experiences as a student on campus. Through these experiences, I became familiar with the campus and aware of the university's traditions and practices. This insider knowledge about the campus and various aspects of the campus community inspired me to investigate the experiences of African American, first generation college students within the selective campus context. None of the participants in this study knew my sister, or were previously affiliated with me personally. To reflect upon the ways that my identity and experiences influence the research process, I practiced reflexivity throughout the dissertation process by creating analytic memos and by maintaining a research journal. Moreover, I used several strategies to ensure reliability and cultivate internal validity, or trustworthiness, as described below.

**Reliability.** Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated (Merriam, 2009). While replication in a qualitative study will not yield the same results, it is important to detail the procedures followed to demonstrate a sense of “dependability or consistency” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). To ensure reliability, I provided an outline of the processes followed for data collection and analysis. Moreover, my research journal served as an ongoing log of procedures followed, rationale for

adjustments to interview questions, and captured my reflections and notes about the project to document the process followed to arrive at the findings presented.

***Adequate engagement in data collection.*** Findings were reported in a rich, descriptive form, highlighting the voices of participants and allowing for the reader to gain a clear sense of their experiences. This was achieved through prolonged engagement with participants over the course of six months through face-to-face interviews, phone interviews, and member checks.

***Member checks.*** The data for this study was primarily collected in the form of individual interviews and a demographic questionnaire. Participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts of their first two interviews as well as their individual case profile. The initial draft case profile was sent to each participant beginning in January 2013, providing participants with an opportunity to review the information and submit comments to clarify ideas using the “track changes” feature in Microsoft Word (Patton, 2002). They were encouraged to report technical inaccuracies, expand on previously mentioned ideas, and report any perceived misrepresentation that was not a true representation of their experiences (Patton, 2002). This information was then reviewed with the participant during the phone follow-up interview and incorporated into their final case profile.

***Reflexivity.*** I practiced reflexivity throughout the process of the study by maintaining a research journal. As detailed above, I worked very closely with the participants, sending them copies of draft findings to confirm and challenge my interpretations through member checking following the interview process and data analysis.

*Peer debriefing team.* I worked closely with a peer debriefing team throughout the research process to help make certain that my findings and interpretations are consistent with the stories shared by participants (Spall, 1998). The peer debriefing teams assisted me by exploring my possible areas of bias and were knowledgeable of the literature related to the college experiences of first generation college students and African American college students; predominantly White institutions, and were familiar with case study methodology (Spall, 1998).

### **Limitations of Method**

Case study allows for the investigation of complex and multiple variables that have the potential of adding to the development of a holistic description of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2009). Case study as a methodology, however, is not without its limitations. First, the case study must be delimited by a bounded system. If the phenomenon of interest is not intrinsically bound, it is not a case. Second, this study explores the experiences of a unique population within a specific context, thus limiting the generalizability of findings to a different population or institutional context. However, as in qualitative research, the intent is not to generalize, but to learn from a particular case. It is dependent upon the reader to glean which conclusions are applicable to any given setting. Despite these limitations, case study methodology is an appropriate approach when exploring a topic on which there is little empirical research (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). It is my intent that this study provides a richer perspective of the experiences of African American, first generation college students attending a selective university and the factors that they perceive as being critical to their success in higher education.



## **Chapter 4: Participant Profiles**

This chapter provides descriptive demographic information for each participant in this study as well as detailed case profiles. Each profile is based upon information gathered through demographic questionnaire responses and individual interviews. Through these case profiles, participants' academic, social, and personal experiences are described in relation to their family background, precollege experiences, and their academic and social encounters at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn).

### **Participant Summary**

This study was designed to explore the academic and social experiences of “first generation” college students, a population traditionally underrepresented on elite college campuses. Penn’s Office of Admissions reports that first generation college students represent 14% of the entering class of 2012, yet the demographic breakdown of this statistic was not available across racial/ethnic groups (A. Yecco, personal communication, October 24, 2012). Last reported in 2010, the mean six-year graduation rate for African American/Black undergraduates at this institution was 92.6 percent for females, and 89 percent for males, compared to 95.5 percent for the overall student body (collegeresults.org, 2012).

Five college students were interviewed three times over a five month period for a total of 15 interviews. The amount of time spent with each participant ranged between approximately 110 minutes and 180 minutes. At the time of the first interview, each participant was enrolled as a student at Penn, three as juniors and two as seniors. While not the original intent of the study, all participants were women. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 21 years old. All students identified as “African American”

(although one student is a first-generation Black immigrant, she also identified as African American). All participants were considered to be first generation college students, as neither parent had earned a bachelors' degree at the time of their college entry. Two participants identified themselves as lower class, one as working class, one as working/middle class, and one as middle class. This self-perception of class was confirmed by participants' parent's educational attainment and occupational status. With the exception of one student who was raised in what she considered a diverse neighborhood, participants were raised in predominately Black neighborhoods. Table 4.1 provides a summary of each participant's demographic profile.

**Table 4.1**

***Participant Demographic Profile***

Participant	Status	Gender	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Mother's Education	Father's Education	Class Status
Alysha	Junior	Female	20	African American	Some college	High school	Middle Class
Leila	Junior	Female	19	African American	Some high school	High school	Lower Class
Patrice	Senior	Female	20	African American	None	None	Lower Class
Robin	Junior	Female	19	African American	Some college	Some college	Middle Class
Tatiana	Senior	Female	21	African American	High School	Some college	Working Class

Three of the five participants were elementary school valedictorians, and three of the five participants were high school valedictorians. All participants attended public high schools. The number of Advanced Placement courses taken during high school



ranged from 1 to 5. Two of the five participants were enrolled in a formal precollege preparatory program prior to attending college. Two participants majored in marketing, while the others majored in communication, chemistry, and nursing. Table 4.2 details a summary of participants' academic profiles.

**Table 4.2**

***Participant Academic Profile***

Participant	Precollege Academic Honors	High school demographics	# of Advanced Placement Courses	Precollege Program?	College Major
Alysha	Elementary, middle & high school honors student	D/public	4	Yes	Marketing
Leila	Elementary salutatorian; high school valedictorian	PM/public	5	No	Communication
Patrice	Elementary valedictorian	PB/public	1	No	Chemistry
Robin	Elementary & high school valedictorian	PB/public charter	5	Yes	Nursing
Tatiana	Elementary & high school valedictorian	PM/public	2	No	Marketing

Note: D = Diverse; PB = predominantly Black, PM = predominantly minority (non-White)

In regards to campus experiences, each participant spent a majority of their college careers living on campus. They are each currently involved in various cultural, social and pre-professional organizations on campus. Furthermore, they are also engaged

in at least one academic program designed to target the needs of minority and/or first-generation college students. Each participant has held a work-study position on campus, averaging approximately 15 hours per week. Table 4.3 provides a summary of students' on-campus profile.

**Table 4.3**

*Participants' On-Campus Profile*

Participant	Living Arrangements	Campus Involvement	Academic Programs	Student Worker
Alysha	On campus 3 years; DuBois 1 year	Pre-Professional; Social	PFP, Africana, PENNCAP	Yes
Leila	On campus 3 years	Pre-Professional	PFP, PENNCAP	Yes
Patrice	On campus 3 years; off campus 1 year; DuBois 1 year	Cultural; Pre-Professional	McNair	Yes
Robin	On campus 2 years; off campus 1 year; DuBois 1 year	Social	PFP, Africana, PENNCAP	Yes
Tatiana	On campus 4 years; DuBois 1 year	Pre-Professional	PFP	Yes

Note: Africana = Center for Africana Studies Summer Institute for Pre-Freshmen; Dubois = Dubois College House; PENNCAP = Pennsylvania College Achievement Program; PFP: Pre-Freshmen Program

What follows is a detailed profile for each participant. I begin with general information about participant's family, their educational background, and college-choice process. Subsequently, I describe some of their academic and social experiences as college students at Penn. I then share their perceived barriers to college persistence for

students who identify as African American and first generation college students within the context of a selective, predominantly White campus environment. I conclude with participants' overall reflection of their educational journey, and share their aspirations and goals for the future.

### **Individual Participant Profiles**

#### **Alysha**

*“I wasn't allowed to ever bring home anything lower than a B.”*

**Family Background.** Alysha was born and raised in upstate New York. She came to Penn interested in expanding her horizons and making the most of the opportunity to attend a prestigious college. Alysha grew up in a diverse neighborhood, in what she described as one of the “nicer” and “pretty safe” areas of her medium-sized city. She grew up in a household with her mother and father (also natives of her hometown) who have been married for 25 years, and two younger brothers, ages 19 and 14. Her mother works as a paralegal and her father is a retired factory worker and military veteran. Neither of her parents has attended college, but her 19-year-old brother is currently a student at a community college in New York state. Alysha described her family as middle class socioeconomically.

**Educational Background.** Education is an important value in Alysha's household. Between her two parents, it was her mother who took the lead in ensuring that Alysha and her brothers were prepared for school. Alysha's mom stayed at home with her for a year preparing her for school prior to entering pre-kindergarten. For as long as she can remember, both of her parents were adamant that Alysha maintain good grades. These expectations over time translated into academic behaviors that led to her

educational success. As Alysha put it, “I kind of set myself up [for success] in a way because I wasn’t allowed to ever bring home anything lower than a B.” These early expectations and experiences helped Alysha develop and internalize her sense of the importance of education and her belief in life-long learning. She shared: “Knowledge is power. There is so much you can learn. I think you can really go to school for life; you can still learn something new.”

Elementary school was a fun time for Alysha as it was during this period, that she began to acknowledge her academic prowess. In the fourth grade, her “favorite year of school ever,” she was known as the math champion of her grade. She shared an instance:

Going over our times tables we would play this game called “Around the World.” Me and this Caucasian girl, we would just clean up the game. Nobody could beat us. And we’re up against sixth graders and we’re like just beating them all.

Alysha was also quite fond of her elementary school teachers. They made learning fun and often rewarded students’ hard work with special events like pizza parties. “It was a really fun year. I was really sad to leave.”

After the fourth grade, Alysha had the opportunity to enroll in “The Academy,” a selective public school known throughout the city for its reputation for academic success. There was an extensive application process, and only half of the students from her elementary school would be invited to enroll. While attending The Academy was beneficial to her scholastically, she recognized that going there would mean that she could potentially lose connections with her friends from her elementary school. She shared the difficulty she faced while making the decision to attend:

I got into The Academy and I got kind of upset because I really wanted to stay [at my elementary school]. I grew up with all those kids since pre-K. But my mom told me [I had to leave], and a portion of kids [were] going as well, so I would

know people. But, I [ultimately] chose to be at The Academy because I knew that it had like a higher level educational wise.

Even at that time, Alysha recognized the long-term consequences of attending this academically competitive school. She shared: “In my opinion, if you didn’t get into [The Academy], I felt like the city kind of gave up on you...you’re not going to get far unless you went to this institution.” Consequently, Alysha felt she had a personal responsibility to make the most of the opportunity to attend The Academy.

It’s a very complex situation and sensitive for me to have to deal with. I always took the pressure on myself, so even if I didn’t *want* to do something educational wise, I’m not doing it just for me, I’m doing it for my cousins, for my aunts, for my uncles, for everybody.

Alysha attended this school from fifth through twelfth grade. She remembers the transition into The Academy as a “kind of rough” experience, particularly socially. In her class of 118 students, there were approximately 20 African Americans. She recalls there being a level of social competition within the African American peer group. She shared: “back then, trying to make friends was always like [a] competition: who got to the lunch table on time and you got to sit there, or sit by yourself. It was really, really tough.” There were also differences between Alysha and her peers academically. Although The Academy was a selective school, she still felt disconnected from her African American peers on an intellectual level.

I just didn’t [fit in] because I was the smart girl. I think one thing that, especially when it comes to that school, they think everybody is smart, and everybody has intelligence if you work – apply it. But I was one of the three Black girls who actually applied it. So that caused a rift in how I got along with the other [African American] girls through high school.

In the seventh grade, Alysha made good friends with a Caucasian girl who was new to the school. This friendship put her again at odds with the other African American

students in her grade. “I kind of left all the Black girls that I was trying to fit in with to be friends with this girl and we became best friends. It was funny that they would say I was leaving them for a White girl.” Despite the challenges Alysha faced with this friendship, she and “Jackie” were best friends through twelfth grade. It wasn’t until Alysha’s senior class trip that she felt that the rift that kept the African American students at her school apart was finally mended. They took the time to sit and share their school experiences, talked out their perceived differences, and acknowledged the ways that students’ alienated her up until that point. Her African American peers finally recognized that while maintaining good grades, Alysha was also involved in some of the social aspects of teenage life as well. She shared:

I loved senior year because that’s when everybody was just chill [and] everybody was cool with each other. That was the first time in all eight years that all the Black people were together. It was deep. We were talking about something, and my friend was like, “Alysha, I don’t understand how you balance social and intellectual,” because everyone knew I had straight As. But I was involved in so much, I was working, I was also going to parties, and they’re looking at me like, “who is she?” In my mind, I’m like, shoot, I don’t know how I did it either!

Alysha was a very active student throughout her tenure at The Academy, involved in various activities such as African dance and basketball, while maintaining a part-time job at a fast food restaurant. When selecting activities to participate in, she was looking for “whatever would have looked good that I was also interested in. Everything was stuff I enjoyed to do.” These activities kept her busy, but also helped her remain competitive in the college application process.

**College Choice Process.** Alysha engaged in a very systematic and deliberate college choice process, which began in the seventh grade. After taking a career inventory, she learned that her top matches were in the fields of advertising and

marketing. She investigated these careers further, and impressed with the duties and salary, began to envision herself in “the big office with like the table and talking [to clients].” With these majors in mind, she then searched colleges via the Internet, and among other choices, the University of Pennsylvania was at the top of the list. She shared this information with her school guidance counselor. Alysha shared their initial encounter:

I [went] to my guidance counselor, and I’m like, ‘I want to go to [one of] these three schools.’ Mind you, I didn’t know what UPenn was; this school was my number one choice. ‘It says it has everything I want, I got to go here.’... she basically responded like I couldn’t get it...I didn’t know it was an Ivy League school.

With the knowledge that her top school was a highly selective institution, she began working with her guidance counselor to set up her class schedule as to ensure she was competitive in the college application process. Alysha completed math through pre-calculus, enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, completed four AP courses, participated in the TRIO Talent Search Program hosted by a local college, and participated in SAT preparation courses.

Senior year, Alysha recalls going through the actual application process alone with minimal input from her parents. Alysha shared her thoughts about the experience:

When it came to me, [my parents] knew that I would go to [college], so that was never a question. I was so independent that I was kind of just running things, and I’m like, you need to sign [this], and they would just sign. They just didn’t know what to do to enlighten me. They still don’t really know, but I’ll be there to help my [youngest] brother in two years.

Penn was the last school that Alysha applied to. At the time, she was unsure she would be able to afford the school, so she decided not to apply early decision. Another student in her school, an Asian young man, also had his heart set on attending Penn. When

Alysha found out she was accepted and he was not, there was a bit of school gossip as to how she managed to secure a spot at this Ivy League institution. While aware that selective institutions did value racial diversity, she felt that it was her academic record and extracurricular experiences that helped her earn her admission into Penn. When students thought otherwise, she let the comments roll off her back.

So I get in and go to school the next day and the Asian dude was pissed. He was like...it was the whole “Black card,” and this and that. I could have given him a piece of my mind, but I realized that I was going to the school he wanted to.

Ultimately deciding to attend Penn was based on financial considerations. Her financial aid package would require her to take out approximately \$10,000 in loans each year. To sway her to decide to attend a private college in her hometown where she was awarded a full scholarship, her parents offered her a car. But, attending the Multicultural Preview Program at Penn helped solidify her decision to attend. “I did Multicultural Scholars Preview for a weekend in April...I left [Penn] with the feeling that I have to go there, but also basically [that] I had to leave home.”

***“I would never [have] accept[ed] anything lower than a B. Now, it’s like ‘eh, whatever, I want to enjoy my time here.”***

**Campus environment.** Alysha’s first experience at Penn was attending the Multicultural Scholars Preview program during the Spring of her senior year. She was paired up with a current student who would be her “mentor” for the weekend, an African American female who also happened to be from her hometown. She described the experience:

Funny story, I got matched up with a girl who was also from [hometown]. So I was pretty excited to hear about that. She took me around to meet some other educated Black people, if you would call them that, and I just fell in love with being here. I enjoyed just knowing I would be around people of the same level as



me. And [since] we [got] in here, the assumption is that you're already smart, so you throw that out the window and just get to know people for who they are. I just loved, like, I told my mom I have to go here because I finally feel like I'm in a place where I fit in. I *have* to.

Once she decided to attend Penn, Alysha took advantage of the opportunity to participate in the PENNCAP Pre-Freshman Program (PFP), a four-week summer bridge program for new students. During this program, Alysha was able to reconnect with individuals she met at the Preview program, and get adjusted to the campus early.

Alysha also participated in the weeklong Africana program. She shared how these experiences really gave her a good idea of the campus environment at Penn in preparation for the fall. She shared: "It was amazing. I didn't know what to expect for the school, but it was good to know [the] campus before anybody else got there and to already have people that I was cool with. I was not lost freshman year taking classes."

While she believed the academic preparation through these programs was highly beneficial, Alysha was most grateful for the opportunity to get to know people on campus, particularly other African American students. Given her experience in high school, she was happy to feel connected early on with other members of the Black community.

One thing that I loved about PENNCAP, and I know it's not exactly [like] the real world, is that it's a support team. All the Black people know each other. Yes, there's a little drama, but at the end of the day, I can honestly say that we are all cool with each other.

**Academic Climate and Culture.** While Alysha made strong social connections on campus, it took more time for her to adjust to the academic expectations of college. She feels this is a typical experience for students at Penn. She shared, "a lot of students, because we're all smart, come in and think we're going to do really well. *So* not the

case.” She attributes this unsteady transition in part to the academic “culture shock” of being in the Wharton School of Business and adjusting to their academic policies. She shared, “you can do A level work just like everybody else, but if your A isn’t like the other persons’ A, you’re going to get a C.” Grading systems like this contribute to what she described as a competitive academic culture. “It’s so competitive; I don’t like that.”

As a high achiever in high school, Alysha realized that she would need to make some adjustments in order to succeed at Penn. She reflected on the change: “You kind of start to realize, you know, that we’re all smart, [but] when you come here it’s a little different. You’re still smart, but you’re going to have to work harder, and really *earn* your grades.” For Alysha, this meant time management and focusing on her work. She shared:

It was more like me focusing and getting stuff done. I need to care enough to do it. If I didn’t care, I’d put it off. I know I’ll get by. Which is I think the biggest change from when I came in here. From then up until now, my motivation is not as strong as it used to be. I would [have] never accept[ed] anything lower than a B. Now, it’s like “eh, whatever, I want to enjoy my time here.

Alysha is also a planner, so freshman year she mapped out her academic plan with all of the courses and electives she would need to take each semester to graduate in four years. By following the plan, she has been able to finish enough requirements where she would be eligible to graduate early. It has also allowed her to create the balance in her course load that would allow for her to maintain a strong GPA. She has not decided yet if she will actually graduate early or whether she will continue and spend four full years on campus. Reflecting on the decision, she shared:

I could graduate this semester; do I want to do that? A part of me is like, oh, I would save mad money. And the other part is - do I really want to leave all of this? So, that’s a big conflict I’m still battling.

As a student in the Wharton School of Business, Alysha has been able to make professional connections that led to an internship opportunity in New York City after her sophomore year. She has also worked as a research assistant for her Marketing professor. Other than her relationship with this professor, she had not made any substantial connections with faculty members on campus. “I’m not one to build, and I probably should I guess, the faculty relationships and stuff like that. But the person I’m working with she was one of my marketing professors so I’m close with her.” Alysha has joined one of the business fraternities, however, which allows her to access the alumni network of professionals that are Wharton graduates. Through this network she has forged good academic relationships with her peers, and has learned about several internship opportunities that she looks forward to leveraging in the future.

**Social Climate and Culture.** Alysha prides herself in her ability to meet and connect with several peers on campus. This began with her time with PENNCAP, the office that facilitates the PFP summer bridge program. Alysha shared: “What PENNCAP really allowed me to do personally was just kind of find myself and who I wanted to be on campus versus how I was in high school.” She admits that she was a bit of a “loner” her first year at Penn since she lived in a single, but after moving in to Dubois College House, an African American themed dormitory with friends sophomore year, she felt more connected socially with her peers. Overall she believes that the Black community on campus as a whole gets along well, but she also recognizes differences within the group. This includes perceived differences based upon students’ style of dress, attitudes, and behaviors. Reflecting on her personal identity and background, she referred to herself as the “Black, Black girl.” She explained further:

Back in [my hometown], I was the little White, Black girl. Here I'm the Black, Black girl. I know how I act sometimes is a little over the top for certain people. And I'm thinking like wow, if I was back home, I'd be not doing enough at all.

Alysha attributes these differences to the affluent neighborhoods and communities in which many of her African American peers grew up. Given the differences between her home community and that of her peers, she expressed that there have been a few spaces in which she has felt that she did not fit in, specifically some of the historically Black sororities on campus.

**Returning Home.** Alysha acknowledges that after attending college, she has lost contact with her best friend Jackie from high school. Since high school their life experiences have distanced them, especially since Jackie did not go to college. Alysha shared:

It was kind of like I need to break away, but I didn't want to. I feel like she needed [my] support, but at the same time I thought that in general if you're going to be friends with anybody, it should be reciprocal. If they're doing well, congrats. If they're not, I wish them the best.

Going home also brings up issues when interacting with extended family members and individuals within her community. As one of the few individuals who left home and is in college, community members often inquire about her progress and then compare her accomplishment to those of her peers. "My [extended] family puts me on a pedestal. I don't really know how to talk about stuff, because I don't want to make my little cousins feel bad." At other times, conversations with family and members of her home community turned negative; claiming that she has changed, become arrogant, and carries herself as if she's better than everyone else. Alysha shared how these negative and hurtful comments are a part of the reason why she visits home less often than she did as a freshman:

It's just when I go home – people sometimes say [negative] things like that...how am I being arrogant by doing what I'm supposed to do? How am I being arrogant for [going to college]? I guess if I were being boastful about it, but that's not me.

To avoid these negative interactions, Alysha seldom returns home unless it's for holidays and limits her time home during summer breaks by spending her summers working.

**Perceived Barriers.** As an African American woman and first generation college student, Alysha identified several barriers that could potentially hinder the college persistence of students such as her. First, Alysha is a self-proclaimed “workaholic,” and has maintained at least two jobs on campus since her freshman year. For her, this is out of habit as well as necessity; it's the only way she can earn all of her allocated work-study money. While Penn boasts a substantial financial aid policy, given her family's financial situation, she has to take out approximately \$10,000 in loans each year. This has been a challenge because she feels that the university should take into consideration more information before determining this family contribution amount. Ultimately she believes the amount of money she takes out each year will be worth it in the end, but she could see how this financial burden could make students decide to find a less expensive option for college.

Another barrier Alysha's experienced is based on her academic sense of self. As a high achiever in elementary and high school, she is uncomfortable with asking for help and utilizing the various academic support services on campus. She shared: “One regret [I have] is not using all of the tutoring services. I don't like to ask for help. I'd rather struggle to make it than ask for help. I wish I would have used them more for my more troublesome classes.” This was confounded by the grading system in Wharton which limits the opportunities for students to earn As in the core courses. To combat this

barrier, Alysha feels that students (including herself) should be more open to recognizing that they would benefit from additional academic support without letting it negatively impact their academic self-worth. This also includes strategically working with peers by taking classes with people you know or making friends with students that are doing well.

**Reflections.** Alysha is a junior marketing major in the Wharton School of Business. Organized, independent, and social, upon graduation she is open to exploring all of the possibilities a Penn education has opened up to her. She looks forward to travelling abroad and perhaps living and working in a Spanish speaking country. Although not yet sure if she will be graduating early, Alysha maintains the philosophy that she *will* make the most of her time at Penn and already recognizes the impact that her experiences thus far have had on her.

I'd say that Penn people are all the same, but they're really not. We're all intellectuals, we're all driven and want to be successful and all of that, but people as so diverse, and so independent. It amazes me when I think about how I was so close to saying in [my hometown]. If I would have done that, not that there aren't amazing people there too, but the range in what I've learned and what I could have ever learned there are completely... [I] just can't put that on the same level.

### **Leila**

***"I only applied to Ivy League schools. I just thought based on my grades and my SAT scores, I knew I fit the profile of those schools."***

**Family Background.** Leila is from a small predominantly African American city located just outside of New York City. From a young age, she envisioned herself attending an Ivy League university. Leila is one of six children; she has three older sisters, and two younger brothers. Each of her older sisters has some postsecondary experience; her eldest sister was the first in her immediate family to earn her bachelors' degree. Along with her siblings, Leila's household included her mother, a homemaker,

and father, an emergency medical technician. Neither of her parents have any postsecondary experience. Leila describes her family as working class socioeconomically.

**Educational Background.** When it came to education, academic success was an implicit value in Leila's household. Thinking about the ways her parents emphasized academic values, Leila stated: "[my mom] never really explicitly said education was important and you need to graduate high school and things like that, but it was kind of implied by how much time she spent with us doing educational things." These educational things included making sure that Leila and her siblings completed their homework assignments and helping them out with school projects and activities. Her parents also enrolled her in an educational daycare program that afforded her with the skills necessary to skip pre-kindergarten and move right into kindergarten at a younger age.

Leila's teachers were at first unsure about the decision for her to begin school early. In fact, she recalls being told by her mother that the kindergarten teacher didn't want her in the class because she thought that she would slow down the other students. Contrary to her teacher's initial expectations however, Leila shared: "I was one of the best students in that class and ever since kindergarten, I've been the top performer." In fact, Leila was the salutatorian of her elementary school, and then her high school's valedictorian.

In her view, the schools Leila attended were predominantly, or "90% African American." She felt well connected to her peers throughout her early educational experiences. This was exemplified by her involvement in academic enrichment activities

during middle school. She shared: “[In middle school] I started really joining the nerd groups. Most of my friends were the ones who were in the math club.” She noted that these positive middle school experiences could perhaps set her apart from other high achieving minority students at Penn.

That’s one thing that I would say would be kind of unique about my experience. I know a lot of students here, well not a lot, but some students here who kind of felt like they were in the nerd group but they were kind of ostracized or they felt like they were picked on. I was really social with my friends. I never felt embarrassed to be doing well in school like some other people might have felt.

Leila attended public schools from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. During the tenth grade, she transferred to the new high school that opened up in her neighborhood. Even though the academics weren’t as strong as her previous school, she switched because it was within walking distance of her house and she didn’t have to take public transportation. This ended up being a time of transition, both academically and socially for Leila. Describing that time period, she shared:

[I] did get involved with people who really weren’t so focused on academics as I was, and my grades did drop, not dramatically, but I did notice then I was more focused on dating and other things.

Overall Leila was involved in various activities during high school, including the choir, Christian praise dance, math club, and the National Honor Society. She was also the vice president of her senior class. Being an involved, well-rounded individual was something that was important to her.

I wanted to engage myself and I was also working part-time and doing these other activities so for me, it wasn’t really getting the highest grade possible, like a 97 or a 99. I just really wanted to do well and improve myself.

Leila believes that her high school academic experiences have influenced her overall college experiences. Due to budget constraints, her high school did not have an



established “honors” program. The school did offer Advanced Placement courses, and she was able to take AP English, AP Spanish, AP Chemistry, and AP Calculus. In regards to the rigor of her curriculum, she made the distinction that while AP in name it may not have experienced the same level of rigor that other students may have had. She clarified: “our AP classes weren’t comparable to some other school[s] because basically you were either in regular or AP. So a lot of people who would have been in honors before and not in AP were now also in AP.”

**College Choice Process.** Even though she had older sisters who went to college, it wasn’t until the 9<sup>th</sup> grade that Leila began to seriously think about college for herself. Her focus was on simply maintaining good grades. She explained her mindset at the time: “Up until high school, I never really thought [about college], it was just organic. I just knew I wanted to do well in school.” Leila’s overall college choice process was shaped by her interest in attending an “Ivy League” institution. She shared: “I only applied to Ivy League schools. I just thought based on my grades and my SAT scores, I knew I fit the profile of those schools.”

Leila’s family was not directly involved in her college choice process. It was her experience at two summer programs that guided and supported her throughout the application process. Originally, Princeton University was Leila’s first choice institution. Her interests in writing and media led her to a summer experience in journalism hosted by Princeton after the tenth grade, which she learned about from her AP Chemistry teacher. The following summer, she attended a QuestBridge conference hosted by Yale University. QuestBridge is a nonprofit organization that recruits and supports motivated high achieving, low-income students to and through college. These experiences

connected her with selective universities who were looking to recruit talented minority students. Leila maintained connections with the staff from the summer program at Princeton, and began the application process the August prior to her senior year. She completed a QuestBridge application, which is a “common application” that allowed her to apply to multiple selective universities all at one time. For this application, the essay emphasized the unique experiences of first generation and minority students with academic potential. Leila recalls spending a good deal of time writing her essay, including information that she had not even shared with members of her family. She shared: “they really want to stress that first generation students have a story to tell.” Leila feels that these experiences really helped ensure she was a competitive applicant for highly selective schools. She shared: “I don’t even think I would have had as strong an application to college that I had if I didn’t do those two programs because they educated me on the process.”

Coming from a large family with modest income, the availability of financial aid was also an important consideration when selecting which college to attend. Having an awareness of the financial aid policies at Ivy League and other selective colleges, Leila felt that these types of schools would be a good option for her financially. She shared her understanding of the policies: “Based on the financial aid policies of specifically Ivy League schools, I just felt I had a good chance of getting in and that it would work out best for me financially.” Explaining these policies, particularly the “no loan” policies of Ivy League institutions to her parents however, was challenging.

My mother, she just got very upset because she just asks like “how are you going to pay for school if you’re not going to take out loans?” Her idea of paying for school was taking out loans. I tried to explain it to her, and yeah I don’t think there was a resolution.

Her father, having had three daughters previously go through the process, completed all of her required financial aid forms. Leila eventually received her acceptance letter and financial aid package and decided to attend Penn. “When I got into Penn I had a really large financial aid package. My family expected contribution was very small.” This difference was made up by outside scholarship money. If she had not accepted the offer to attend Penn, she most likely would have attended another Ivy League institution.

*“We feel like we’re missing something. We have very high GPAs; we don’t really have a social life.”*

**Campus Environment.** Leila’s first visit to Penn’s campus was in April of her senior year for the Multicultural Weekend Program. Multicultural Weekend featured many of the diverse clubs and organizations on campus that students could get involved in once they became students in the Fall. Leila was able to meet a number of individuals who would become good friends, and the experience during Multicultural Weekend made her excited to get an early start at Penn. Consequently, she decided to participate in the PENNCAP Pre-Freshman Program (PFP).

So after Multicultural Weekend, I knew when the email came to apply for the [Pre-Freshman] Program, to have an opportunity to take a Penn class before you came to Penn, I was like “why not?” I really liked my experience while I was there last time, so I came.

The PFP experience gave Leila her first taste of the academic rigor of campus. For her, the four-week summer program was “academically intense.” While the program involved completing 1-course unit (equivalent to 3 credits) and attending academic enrichment seminars, it was also a place to connect socially with other students.

In terms of the overall campus climate, Leila described some of the general characteristics of members of the campus community. She feels that students outwardly

seem to be handling all of the responsibilities of college well, but there is some sense of the underlying pressures experienced by Penn students. She stated:

It's just this attitude like "I'm doing well in all my classes and I'm happy." I just feel like you don't really see people express openly if they're struggling with anything. I know that's human nature, you just don't go around [telling people about] your problems, but here I think it's more pressure to be composed all the time.

**Academic Climate and Culture.** Prior to entering college, Leila had a long history of academic success. She aspired to attend a prestigious university, and felt that she fit the profile academically for students at Penn. After arriving, however, she acknowledges that she was not quite ready for the transition. She tied this perception back to her academic preparation in high school in terms of her course work and her level of focus. She explained: "In terms of the academic part, I really did not prepare at all. Even senior year [I] basically took a break from school and I just did not start off [college] on the right foot." As a result, Leila started off her freshman year really focused on having a good time, and within the classroom, continued the study habits that she used in high school. This strategy unfortunately did not work for her, and she received a poor grade on her first major exam. After this experience, she began to strategize and figure out what she needed to do to be academically successful. One thing Leila discovered during the transition was that time management was key. Learning to balance social commitments and academic responsibilities was a particularly important skill for her.

I met with my academic advisor very frequently; I went to this workshop on campus for managing your course load. I really took it seriously after I did poorly in my class, and as of the next semester I got straight As. I just stayed on top of my assignments.

As a student in the School of Arts and Sciences, Leila has a high level of flexibility when it comes to selecting her courses. Based on her experiences her first

semester, she now makes a conscious effort to block her schedule in ways that maximize her time. This is because she realized that time management is key for her to keep up with her assignments. She shared:

I have a lot of flexibility and I basically put in my schedule so I would have blocks of time free. First semester I just picked classes that I liked, and they would meet in the evening, and at this time – I was just all over the place. Even now the number one priority is time. I need to be able to get up, and go there, and pay attention.

In Leila's experience, her professors have not been very open to class discussion, and rarely recognize students for taking the time to participate in class as she would like. "Professors say that they want you to challenge [ideas]. They encourage you to speak your mind but they are not very accepting of when you challenge proven research or their opinion." Moreover, "then they don't necessarily give credit to the folks who are giving input. You're going to ask for participation and then you don't count that in [the grading]? What's the point?"

Overall, Leila has done well academically. Within specific courses, however, Leila notices a sense of competitiveness, particularly in the classes she takes in the Wharton School of Business. This competitive culture has had negative implications for the learning environment at Penn, in her opinion: "...it's not like you just want to do well enough for you, you're always looking to see how well the next person is doing."

**Social Climate and Culture.** Initially, Leila made strong social connections during her first year in college. She had made friends with students during the PFP summer bridge program, and socially was able to hang out with them on a regular basis. She also served as a peer advisor on campus and in the surrounding community that helped her meet individuals on and off campus. Her level of connectedness, however,

began to change over time. The changing dynamic of her friendship groups on campus really made Penn not the place she wanted to be. Leila strongly considered leaving Penn twice, first, right after freshman year, and then again after sophomore year. She even went as far as completing an application to transfer to a prestigious university on the West Coast. Recognizing that the transfer process is challenging, and that she was on track academically at Penn, she ultimately decided stay.

Freshman year, I had that really solid semester. [Late in my] second semester - it was after my friends had all joined sororities and I was very - not lonely - it was such a hard transition to go to not [knowing] who I was spending my weekends with. Since the social aspect is the only aspect that I'm unhappy with, maybe I can stay. So I stayed.

Overall, Leila has found that there are other opportunities to be involved and connected with the various communities on campus. Leila feels that being an African American student has not limited or dramatically influenced her experiences. "Being at Penn I don't feel that like my race has really affected my experience, at least socially that much." Leila maintains a diverse friend group of Latinas and Asian students, and is involved in organizations that are not solely race based because that experience is not something she was looking for. She is however, connected with fellow students who come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds through her involvement in the on-campus Questbridge organization, a hub for Questbridge scholars enrolled at Penn. She shared:

It's just 'cause I didn't really feel connected with [the African American community]. I think my experience was different from someone who is very involved in the Black community. I don't know if that would have made my transition better if I had joined one of those communities. I never really felt like the odd one out when I was the only Black person in a group but there are other people who might feel that way.

**Returning Home.** Returning home to visit family and friends has led Leila to acknowledge the ways that she has changed during her time in college. These feelings are particularly salient when interacting with friends from high school.

So I just don't feel we had as much in common and I do think I definitely changed from freshman year, sophomore year, to junior year of college, so I'm sure they all have. But especially the ones who stayed in [hometown], I just feel like they haven't grown out of the [hometown] mentality.

She is also more uncomfortable with the physical environment of her home community now that she's older. She described her hometown: "there's a lot of dollar stores, people hanging out on the streets, and I can't walk down the street without being catcalled. My father has to drive me everywhere now. I don't even feel comfortable walking." While she attributes some of these feeling to the natural separation that comes from getting older and gaining new experiences, she also feels that it's a good opportunity to separate herself from her hometown in many ways: "I kind of actually want to [re]move myself - break connections from [hometown] because I just have too many negative feelings about that city."

**Perceived Barriers.** For Leila, a key barrier to students' college persistence at a place like Penn is being able to find a good social/academic balance in college. She was a high achiever in high school, but in college, her emphasis on academics has overshadowed other elements of her experience. She described this sense as follows:

We feel like we're missing something... we have very high GPAs. We don't really have a social life. Or [we] don't go home often. It's so hard to be healthy, you know, have a good diet, exercise and eat well, and get enough sleep, and do well in class, and have a satisfying social life.

To mitigate this barrier, Leila feels that the university should recognize that students are facing a great deal of pressure, internally and externally, to succeed in college, and make

available support systems for students to tap into when they feel the strain. One such support that she feels has been helpful is the call-in “Hotline” run by students on campus who listen to the concerns of fellow students and direct them to the professional resources on campus as needed. In her view with enhanced financial support for campus organizations such as the “Hotline” they can increase awareness of this service so that students know that there is someone who can listen to their concerns.

Given her social experiences on campus, another potential barrier to college persistence is that not experiencing a sense of “fit” or a sense of belonging on campus. Leila described that not having close friends on campus had a serious impact on her socially, as well as academically. On two occasions, she seriously considered transferring to another university. For Leila, focusing on her academics and graduating early has been her strategy for mitigating this barrier, but reflecting on the decision to stay, she feels that she should have gone to another college where she could have had a better social experience. She shared: “if I had to do it over I do think I should have put more consideration into transferring...I don’t think it’s the school, I think it’s the match up. For me it didn’t match somehow.”

**Reflections.** Leila is currently completing her degree in communication. Upon graduation, she plans to work in corporate communications, managing a company’s brand and reputation. She’s interested in traveling abroad or perhaps relocating to California for career opportunities. She looks forward to the freedom that comes with her pending graduation, stating: “I just feel like when I graduate I have no responsibilities so that’s the time that [I] should feel comfortable going [and] moving anywhere, and you know starting my own life.” Although she is not completely satisfied with the social



aspect of her college experience, she realizes that her overall experience at Penn has helped her grow and mature.

It has changed me tremendously, and honestly, literally I feel like I changed so much every year. Things I did freshman year I could never see myself doing now, and I think because of the experience that I've had and I think being at Penn has made me a lot more resilient and a lot more focused.

### **Patrice**

*“I was coasting by. I was serious but I wasn't very, very serious.”*

**Family Background.** Patrice was born and raised in a borough of New York City. A self-proclaimed “science person,” Patrice worked hard throughout grade school to gain the opportunity to attend the best college possible. She is the eldest in a family of five children, and a first generation college student. Her next oldest sister is a sophomore at a State University of New York (SUNY) school. Patrice's parents immigrated to the United States from West Africa in the mid 1980s and have no formal education. Patrice's mother is primarily a stay-at-home mom, and works at a daycare center part-time; her father is a traveling African arts salesman. Patrice grew up in a minority community with mostly African American and Latino neighbors. She identified herself as coming from a lower class family socioeconomically.

**Educational Background.** Given her parents' educational background, Patrice expressed that education has always been a priority in her household. She shared: “[My parents] want us to go to school, get a good education, [and] get a job so that we can live better than they did.” Personally, education has also been a strong value for Patrice, and recalls enjoying going to school and learning new things.

Patrice attended various public schools located within her neighborhood.

Although born in the United States, when she first started school Patrice did not know

English since her parents spoke their native language in the home. As a result, she remembers kindergarten being very challenging, mostly through the stories her parents have told her about how she would come home crying because she had difficulty communicating in class. Fortunately, she recalls how she “adored” her kindergarten teacher who helped her learn English throughout the year. By first grade, Patrice remembers knowing English and recalls elementary school as “pretty good” in terms of her academic success. To promote a college going culture, the classrooms at her middle school were named after different colleges and universities. She remembers doing well in middle school, but in retrospect, she shared: “I was coasting by. I was serious but I wasn’t very, very serious,” mostly because the academic requirements were not too strenuous in her opinion. In addition to her kindergarten teacher, Patrice’s most memorable teachers were her math and chemistry teachers who would reward students who excelled in their classes.

After a successful ninth grade year, Patrice was selected to participate in an accelerated program offered by her high school, which allowed her to complete her diploma requirements in 3 years instead of 4. The cohort of approximately 25 students took essentially all their classes together over the next two years. Despite the accelerated pace, in her opinion, this high school did little more than prepare her for the New York State Regents Exam requirements. As she reflected on the experience, she shared: “Because it was a public school, they kind of taught us to [the] test. So for me, I thought the Regents were not very challenging. I thought the classes were not very challenging, at least for me.” As she described, her classes were “sort of” honors classes. She took the only Advanced Placement Exam offered by her high school in Environmental

Science, and scored a 4 out of 5. Through her school she was also able to take two psychology courses at a local community college, and was involved in college preparatory activities. Outside of school, Patrice participated in track and field and did some volunteer work. Overall, she feels that she was a well-rounded student: “I worked hard. I cared about my grades so I cared about school.”

**College Choice Process.** Along with the other students in her accelerated cohort, Patrice was involved in SAT preparatory classes at the end of her second year of high school, and began researching the colleges and scholarship opportunities that she would apply to. As a first generation college student and daughter of immigrants, Patrice was not able to turn to her parents for information about the college search process. It was however important to her that they were involved in the process. She conceded that it was *her* responsibility to keep *them* up to date with the information that she was obtaining: “My parents don’t really know about the process so that’s my job to inform them.” In the end, the school guidance counselor became her primary resource.

[We had a] really, really good guidance counselor. She worked very closely with everyone in our senior class; making sure we got our stuff in on time, making sure we had reasonable expectations; financial aid. She was phenomenal.

Patrice’s choices for college included a range of institutions, both public and private within the Northeastern region of the United States. Despite having a wide range of institutions under consideration, she did share that paying for college was a concern for her family. Consequently, she was looking for schools with good financial aid policies so she didn’t let the cost of any particular institution in itself shape her choice set.

Looking at Penn’s sticker price [laughter] that’s a big, big, big turn off for a lot of people, but their financial aid is very good. When I applied I had seen [Penn] had sort of a no loan, 50 percent need met policy. It doesn’t hurt to apply. Many people don’t even consider the school as an option.

Even more than cost, leaving home was the primary concern for her parents, as it would mean their first born would be moving away at the age of 17. Patrice's father was the one she had to convince when it came to supporting her decision to attend Penn.

I kind of explained to him that you know, I got into Penn. This is a great university. This is sort of like a once in a lifetime thing and you know, I have to go here. I mean they *had* to let me go because I applied early decision.

With the decision made, she packed up her things and her father and next eldest sister drove her off to college that Fall.

*“It was very, very new. Definitely nothing I’ve ever experienced before. It was an eye-opener as to what the rest of college would be like.”*

**Campus Environment.** Patrice's first opportunity to see Penn was through an impromptu visit with friends for a fall Preview event. She recalled the experience with a sense of nostalgia:

I visited [Penn] in September of my last year of high school and after coming on the campus tour I just loved it! I kind of knew at that moment that I would be here; that I wanted to be here. And I applied early so I could [get in].

Patrice had a positive initial impression of the campus environment, and was impressed with its physical beauty. “It was really pretty. I like the landscape here. It’s a very pretty city. It was very historical looking, for some reason it had a *feel* to it. I loved it.” In contrast to her experience taking courses at a community college in New York as a high school student, to Patrice Penn felt like a “real campus.”

**Academic Climate and Culture.** Patrice began college uncertain about what she wanted to do but came in as a pre-medicine student and took courses in chemistry and calculus. During that first semester, she got a better sense of the academic expectations of a science major.

I think of course the most challenging was chemistry and calculus. I didn't have any calculus in high school, but I found that the calculus here wasn't very bad. I understood most of the time and I did fine. Chemistry was [bad]. I was enrolled in regular CHEM 101 (General Chemistry I), but I was so confused. I had no idea what was going on.

So, I went to the CHEM department and they enrolled me in a special introductory course which was a little better because the professor assumed very little, minimal knowledge for the class. And that also helped me to connect to a professor here because I was the only undergrad in that class.,I continued with him to take CHEM 102 (General Chemistry II) so that was nice.

These early experiences in math and science prompted the realization that in order to succeed academically at Penn, Patrice would need to make some modifications to her study habits. She shared:

I kind of was continuing what I did in high school, which was a complete disaster. I would not study for exams until like the two or three days before the exam, so that...that didn't end well [laughter]. It was very, very new. Definitely nothing I've ever experienced before. It was an eye-opener as to what the rest of college would be like.

Patrice also acknowledged the gaps in her academic preparation in contrast to the academic expectations at Penn: "I [had chemistry in high school] but I didn't find it useful to me at all here. It was completely - I guess it was just too basic to compare to the level here at Penn." As she reflected on that time period, she shared:

Second semester I did a lot better because I went home during winter break and I was just like "this is awful. This is not me. I can do much better than this." So, I tried to come up with a much better study schedule and I followed that throughout.

Sophomore year, Patrice officially became a chemistry major, took a heavier course load, and began engaging in more effective study habits. As she advanced academically, she began taking core classes specifically for chemistry majors. These classes were a lot smaller and allowed her to get to know the people in the major. To Patrice, this was a refreshing break from the larger lecture courses that attracted a lot of

pre-med students who have “a stigma that they’re very intense [and] very focused because they want As so they can get into medical school.” Even though there is often a perception that there are few women in the sciences, in the chemistry major, women outnumber men. Patrice feels quite comfortable in her classes and does not perceive any gender differences in the classroom as compared to when she was in other larger science classes. She shared: “When I was in physics or like when I was in introductory chemistry, those classes were really big and it’s easier to see the male dominance there, definitely.”

At the end of sophomore year, Patrice became a participant in the Ronald B. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair). McNair is a federally funded program that prepares eligible (low-income and first generation or members of racial/ethnic groups underrepresented in graduate education) students for graduate studies leading to a Ph.D. She found out about McNair through a targeted letter from the Director of the McNair Program on campus. The program requires that students connect with a faculty mentor who will work with them on undergraduate research during the summer and academic year. As a part of the program, Patrice engaged in a summer research institute in a small, structured program on campus. “I also started working in the lab that I would be in for all of junior year and that introduced me to research and that was good.” This was a paid experience, as well. The laboratory (organic chemistry) was large with 25 people and she worked with a graduate student there. The experience really got her thinking about the possibilities of continuing graduate studies in chemistry. She shared: “The summer went well, so I was thinking ‘I can do this. I can do research.’”

Despite these positive experiences, by the middle of her junior year, Patrice decided that she would “never ever return” to the lab. Her lab commitments, course requirements, and work-study schedule proved too difficult to manage. “[My] graduate [level] course was really, really difficult and I didn’t have time to study for it because I was working in the lab during my independent study and I kept my regular job.” Working 15 to 20 hours a week, living alone, and trying to balance her academic responsibilities contributed to what she described as a “difficult,” “depressing,” and “disappointing” semester. When trying to explain the challenges of maintaining this balance with her faculty mentor, she felt that he was not as understanding as he could have been. She shared:

At the end of the semester I sat down to talk with my mentor and he was saying “You aren’t spending enough time in [the lab]” and stuff like that. I was just very, very angry because I felt like I had been spending plenty of time there. I was basically doing nothing outside of lab, school, and work. So yeah, I was very disappointed...after that semester I decided for spring that I would sort of take a break.

Ultimately, Patrice decided to significantly decrease her time in the lab so that she could focus on her other academic and work responsibilities. With the modified schedule, she was able to find a better balance and saw improvements in her grades from that term forward.

**Social Climate and Culture.** Patrice’s social experiences were greatly shaped by her campus living arrangements and engagement with other African American students on campus. Freshman year, Patrice lived in a suite with three other women but initially was not close with any of her suitemates. There were two reasons for this, first she was “younger than everyone” and second it was her first experience as the only African American person in the group, “so that was a little weird.” As a result of her living

situation, her age, and the fact that she did not participate in any of the summer bridge programs offered by Penn, Patrice shared that she did not have too many friends freshman year. Fortunately, her dormitory's resident assistant "was really nice and she really tried to foster a sense of community." With time, she became best friends with one of her suitemates and sophomore year they decided to move together to Dubois College House, the African American themed dormitory on campus. She feels that living in a very active building made it easier for her to make new friends. Dubois often hosts a myriad of social events including joint ventures into the city for Philadelphia's Restaurant Week. Junior year, Patrice moved off campus to a single to save money, as it was less expensive than campus housing. Living alone was difficult, but fortunately she was "taken in" by a friend who had previously lived alone and knew how it felt. "He was always inviting me out to eat with them and study with them." Their friendship helped her not feel like she was alone on campus.

Patrice works part-time as a front desk assistant and also works as a teaching assistant in a local elementary school, an activity that she feels is important and allows her to give back to the surrounding community. Given her demanding schedule she has been involved in a select few organizations on campus, most notably the Pan-African Student Association (PASA). Through PASA she has made several friends and has had opportunities to connect with her African culture. She shared: "I do make an effort to attend almost all [events] and that [organization's] really nice because all of us [are] sort of African and we share the heritage. We don't all speak the same language but we share the same culture." Through PASA she has been able to cultivate what she described as a close knit group of friends.



**Returning Home.** Patrice has a very close relationship with her family, and credits some of her parents' expectations for her to their cultural heritage. Her parents, already uneasy about her decision to leave home early and attend a college away from home, encouraged her to come home regularly. Consequently, freshman year Patrice went home quite often.

I went home a lot on the weekends because my parents guilted me into [it] because I'm the oldest child. I'm the first person to leave home. I went home almost every weekend my first semester, so I didn't do that much socializing actually.

Patrice knew that going home was not helping her make social connections on campus, but also realized that going home was not helping her academically. She had trouble sharing her apprehensions about her classes and academic performance with her parents, especially given her history of academic achievement through high school. She felt that these concerns were easier to communicate with her peers rather than her parents.

Well my parents have never really been involved in like academic stuff so they didn't know my grades, and I generally don't let them know if I'm struggling in school or stuff like that so they didn't know. I spoke to some of my friends from high school and we were all kind of going through the same thing, so we talked a lot and tried to help each other out as best as we could. I still talk to a lot of them because we still go through some of the same things.

As the frequency of her going home has decreased over time, Patrice feels that she has been able to make more friends, socialize, and engage in better study habits. Now that her younger sisters are older, she talks to them a bit more about college, particularly the college choice process. One thing they discuss is where to apply, and how their parents would react to moving too far from New York City. In fact, her parents wanted *her* to transfer closer to home after her first year. She shared: "My parents actually wanted me to transfer back to a school in New York, but I didn't want to so I just stayed here."

These expectations for staying close to home, in her view, stem from her parents' cultural heritage. As she explained: "It's their culture that the girls are supposed to stay in the house and not sort of live very far by themselves and things like that. My dad is sort of more rational of the two." Patrice also talks to her sisters about her college experiences, how she studied, what types of campus jobs she's had, financial aid questions, and the grades she's earned. She has not visited her sisters' college campus due to conflicting academic calendars, but believes that their experiences would be different because of the types of schools they attend and their differing majors.

**Perceived Barriers.** Patrice identified three main barriers to college persistence for African American, first generation, lower-income students such as herself: finding social connections, financial burdens, and understanding the academic rigor of Penn. First, at different times during her college career making social connections was challenging for Patrice. She feels that her decisions to live in the African American themed housing and get involved in ethnic based organizations really helped her find people to relate to on campus. She recognizes that finding these types of connections can be particularly important for students of color at Penn. She shared:

I know now a lot of students here, especially students of color in the building in Dubois. They can have more people who are like themselves to sort of relate to. But I lived in Hill [freshman year]...and I was the only person of color in my suite. For me that was a little awkward. Now I have lots of friends because I live [in Dubois] and also because I was in [the Pan African Student Association] so I got to know a lot more people but yeah, just not having people to relate to is...it will get to you eventually.

Patrice is also cognizant of financial barriers that limited the time she has available to take care of various responsibilities. Despite having the financial aid provided by university, she knew that she would need to find employment in order to take care of her

general living expenses. “I worked maybe 15 to 20 hours a week, so the time constraint was really challenging.” Finally, Patrice believes that the academic rigor of the university is something that students should be made fully aware of. She noted that this could be more acute for students like her who were educated in public schools:

Just the transition from high school, especially not coming from like a preparatory school, like people that I’ve spoken to. For them high school may have been even harder than the time that they are having here. For me, high school was miles easier than it is now.

In order to mitigate this potential barrier to persistence, Patrice expressed the view that new students should be reminded that Penn will be academically challenging, and they should expect to work hard. Moreover, she feels that pointing students to more groups on campus to make good friends will help with the adjustment to college. “Basically school and your friends are basically the most important things. I mean people do it, but if you’re all work and no fun, I guess some people can do that but most people I think it will just be too much.” She also values the importance of mentorship to mitigate these challenges. “For people that are first generation and don’t have parents or other figures who have gone through this, it’s sort of helpful to speak to an adult who has gone through it all and you know, have them give advice.”

**Reflections.** Patrice summarized her Penn experience thusly “I feel smarter. I feel like I have learned a lot in my years here, academically and socially.” Patrice is majoring in chemistry. A graduating senior, she is deciding on what her next steps will be: graduate school or medical school. She appreciates that she could have gone anywhere for college, but recognizes the benefits of coming to a “top ten university.”

I’m sure it would have been easier - the classes and things like that. But I feel like Penn being the big university that it is and also having so much money then you have more resources and I don’t regret coming here.

## **Robin**

*“I had both parents showing up to everything and other people either had one or none.”*

**Family Background.** Robin was raised in the Southern region of the United States and came to Penn looking forward to living in the heart of a big city. The eldest of two, Robin grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood just outside a large metropolitan city. She describes her home neighborhood as “for the most part a suburban area, kind of rural, not really the country but not really city-like.” She has a “nuclear family” situation; she lives with her mother and father who have been married for over 20 years, and one younger brother, a college freshman at a private university in Florida. Robin’s mother works as an administrative assistant at a hospital and her father is a call center representative. Both of Robins’ parents completed some college, and her mother is currently working on completing her bachelors’ degree. Robin described her family as working/middle class socioeconomically.

**Educational Background.** Education is very important to Robin’s family. Trying to find the best educational options in the neighborhood was a bit of a challenge, however. Unlike her brother who had a relatively consistent educational experience, Robin described herself as being the educational “guinea pig.” She attended several schools throughout her academic career, as her parents deliberately attempted to enroll her in schools with strong academic programs. This included attending public, parochial, and charter schools in her area.

Robin’s parents were very engaged in her education; they “checked our homework, made sure they knew our teachers, [attended] all the PTA (Parent/Teacher

Association) meetings. They were heavily, heavily involved in our education, our success.” Moreover, Robin described education as being a “big, big priority” for her father, stemming from “his own ideas and his own experiences of education having gone to [a prestigious college] and not finishing.” He actively encouraged Robin and her brother to get involved in different college preparatory programs and made sure they had resources such as Advanced Placement (AP) and SAT preparatory books to help them become competitive in the college admissions process.

Thanks to the efforts of her parents and her internal motivation to succeed, Robin excelled academically throughout elementary, middle, and high school. As a result, she was valedictorian of her elementary and high school graduating classes. Robin had the opportunity to be bused to a competitive public charter school for high school, which was a little more racially/ethnically diverse, and took advanced courses there. She recalled being one of few African American students in her advanced courses. Because she was on the accelerated track, she recalls her teachers talking often about the importance of preparing for college. Her math teacher in particular stood out as being influential. Robin shared: “She was probably the biggest influence as far as thinking about college, and helping me to understand that it was going to be competitive.” During high school, Robin completed five AP courses and participated in a college access program during her junior year, the same one her father completed nearly 30 years prior. In school, she was involved in the school chorus, was a member of the swim team, and a member of the National Honor Society.

**College Choice Process.** *Not* going to college was simply not an option for Robin; she just had to decide what to study and where to go. She initially aspired to be a

doctor, but after the experience of shadowing a nurse, she fell in love with the nursing profession. Her mother used her connections from working in a hospital to arrange this opportunity when Robin was 13. It wasn't until junior year in high school, however, that Robin began to actively seek out potential college options. Robin shared, "I kind of just did the whole thing just by myself. I didn't get help from [my mother], not because she didn't want to give it to me. I just kind of decided, I can do this, and it worked out." Knowing she wanted to be a nurse, Robin entered "best nursing programs" into an Internet search engine and discovered that the University of Pennsylvania had one of the top undergraduate programs in the nation. After narrowing down her choice set to a handful of public and private colleges with nursing programs, her parents offered support with the decision making process. They supported her by searching the Internet to find additional information about these colleges, took her (and sometimes her friends) on college visits to these schools, and completed all of the required financial aid forms. It wasn't until very late in the process that Robin discovered that Penn was an "Ivy League" school. At the end of the process, she narrowed her decision to Penn and another private, selective university in the mid-Atlantic region. She actually preferred the other institution, but her decision to attend Penn was ultimately a financial one; Penn was the institution that required the least out-of-pocket expenses.

*"Especially at an elite university, you kind of go in like 'yeah, I was at the top of the class, I'm so smart, I don't need a tutor.' I was full of pride. I needed help, I just didn't go get it."*

**Campus Environment.** Like many underrepresented minority students, Robin was offered the opportunity to participate in the summer bridge programs hosted by Penn.

She participated in a bridge program for nursing students, PENNCAP Pre-Freshman Program (PFP) and the Center for Africana Studies Summer Institute for Pre-Freshman (Africana). Through these programs, she got her first glimpse of both the social and academic climate of campus. Robin described the campus as “very unified” and was impressed with the fact that “you can choose to get out there and hang out with all kinds of people.” She was also impressed with the diversity of the student body, as well as the array of social activities that were available on campus. Robin was comfortable with Penn’s location; being in a city with a readily accessible public transportation system was important to her, and made it easier for her to explore the city-life with her new campus friends. She took advantage of opportunities to venture off campus during her first summer, and even attended events on the nearby Drexel University campus to get out of the “Penn bubble.”

**Academic Climate and Culture.** Robins’ participation in the summer bridge programs offered through Penn was a chance for her to gain an early sense of the academic culture of college. First, Robin was appreciative of the opportunity to meet and interact with current students. She recalls: “I got to spend a lot of time with people who were already students here; both graduate students and undergraduates. That was a lot of fun because they were really [intelligent] top notch kind of students.” These upperclassmen helped new students like Robin by providing tips and advice about how to adjust to the academic expectations of college. Additionally, Robin feels she gained a lot from her experience in PFP and Africana. PFP, a four-week experience, was Robin’s first exposure to the academic rigor of Penn. She was impressed with the professors during the program and “how heavily invested” they were; “how much they loved

teaching...I wasn't always used to that." Africana was a one-week program also taught by Penn faculty, which exposed students to "the intellectual and cultural themes and currents in 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> century African and African Diaspora studies" (Africana, 2013). Within this predominantly African American program, faculty were adamant about encouraging students to internalize the perspective that they had earned their admission into Penn through their hard work and scholastic achievement and that they could be successful academically and socially on campus. She shared:

They would continually throw it in our face like, "remind yourself that you belong here. You earned your spot"... I guess they had this fear that a lot of us did feel like we didn't belong and [would] feel like somewhere along the way that we weren't going to feel like the smart girl or the smart guy that we were anymore.

While she thought Africana's emphasis on cultivating students' sense of belonging was a bit overbearing initially, she recognizes that remembering these messages during times of challenge has helped later on in her academic career at Penn. During these programs, she was also made aware of the various academic resources available on campus, and she was forewarned that the educational expectations were high, especially as a nursing student. "[They] made it pretty obvious early on that it would be rigorous, but that we were going to enjoy it and it was going to be a lot of help for us." All in all, Robin described these experiences as "invaluable."

Despite her participation in the summer bridge programs, Robin experienced some difficulty adjusting to the academic expectations of college. As an academic high achiever, her biggest challenge was recognizing that she personally could use some help. She shared her perception of this adjustment for students like her:

I think this happens to pretty much every high school student, especially at an elite university. You kind of go in like, "yeah, I was top of my class, I'm so smart, I don't need a tutor." You know the real textbook definition of a good high



school student who then goes on to a really tough college. At the end of the [first] semester, I saw my grades, and [I] didn't do so great.

When communicating with her father about her transition to college and her experiences early on, she felt he was worried that she was getting “caught up” in the social side of college life. She spent a lot of time trying to figure out the source of her trouble as well, first attributing her grades to external factors, but eventually reflecting on her own behaviors.

At first I tried to blame everyone but myself. I was like “ah, it's my high school's fault, they didn't prepare me for this.” You know, “this teacher could have done XYZ.” And then, by the end of the next semester, I was like “ok, this is all my fault. I just need to get this together. I need to not be full of pride.” I was full of pride, you know, I would get an assignment that I *knew* I did not understand, and I'd be like, ‘oh I can figure this out, because I'm me. I got here, so I can figure it out.’ I needed help. I just didn't go get it.

By her sophomore year, Robin began to engage in more effective study habits. She has become more strategic in the selection of her classes to balance out her academic load to ensure higher grades. She also believes she is more disciplined in her approach, learning to work “smarter” not “harder.” Notwithstanding these adjustments, Robin admits that she still has not utilized the various academic resources on campus.

As far as the resources on campus, I sadly admit I still haven't really taken as much advantage as I could have. Something still just kind of tells me that I can do without it, you know? I have watched myself pull from bad to good, and get better, and just fix it myself.

Within her major, Robin has also had to adjust to the unique academic experiences of the School of Nursing. For Robin, the first adjustment was to the size, and to the few numbers of African American students in the nursing program. She shared: “There are only about 90 something kids in my class. So you don't meet a lot of nursing kids, especially not in the Black community.” While small, the size makes it easier for

her to access and get to know the faculty and staff in her department. One such individual is one of the professional staff advisors in nursing who has been helpful when making curriculum decisions and answering basic questions about the program. Robin has also connected with her faculty advisor, who despite maintaining responsibilities as a “top notch” researcher always finds time for her advisees.

In addition to these individuals within her major, Robin has also been able to connect formally and informally with faculty members and graduate students from across the university through her work-study position as a front desk assistant for one of the academic departments on campus. Robin has maintained her work-study position on campus since her first semester freshman year. The job pays well and on most days allows adequate time for studying. Talking about her job, she shared:

[My job] has been a little hidden treasure for me because I can come to [the faculty] with things that I might need help with, or social or extracurricular things that I need assistance with. I interact with them quite a bit. [There are also] a lot of graduate students there that I make connections with, even though there’s not a lot of common ground in terms of what we’re studying and what we’re here for. They’re just another resource if you ever need anything.

**Social Climate and Culture.** Robin was overall impressed with the sense of diversity and inclusion on campus and the number of programs made available to freshman students. As she described, “there were a lot of cultural events and there were a lot of parties.” This was very different from her social experience prior to Penn, as she was young and didn’t venture out often to experience nightlife in her hometown. She found it to be easy to gather together other students to hang out with. She shared: “I guess with all of us being new to the scene it was just a natural ‘let’s all get together, [go out], and see what’s going on.’ There wasn’t a lot of exclusivity.”

Living in Dubois College House also helped to foster a sense of community. Dubois is the African American themed dormitory on campus, and is smaller than the traditional high-rise dormitories that are most prevalent at Penn. To Robin, it was a “very family oriented” living community, where the house staff would host special activities and events throughout the year, including special dinners for the holidays. Moreover, the House Dean was a mother figure to Robin, who was “especially adamant about making sure we were safe.” In fact, the House Dean even gave specific information about which organizations’ parties to avoid. In Robin’s view, the House Dean wanted to “make sure we had a good time but that we followed the rules so she was pretty strict.”

While reflecting on whether or not she felt a sense of community within the larger campus environment, Robin shared that she had been able to find a lot of people with whom she had a lot in common. As she put it, “certain people just kind of flock together.” Socially, Robin described having a close peer group of “pretty Black girls” that she likes to hang out and study with. When describing the dating scene on campus, she noted that while most people are not looking for long-term relationships, it can be challenging to connect with Black males on campus because at times they act as if they are “kind of on a high horse,” particularly those who in the engineering and Wharton schools. Consequently, Robin is a bit frustrated with the dating prospects on campus.

**Returning Home.** The decision to attend college so far from home has had implications for her relationship with her family and with members of her home community. Even now, she remains very connected with her parents and younger brother. Given that her mother is also completing her bachelor’s degree, she also feels a little friendly competition between the two of them when it comes to maintaining good

grades and progressing towards graduation. To maintain these relationships, Robin communicates with her parents and brother via the phone frequently, as financial constraints limit opportunities for her to travel home or for her family to visit her on campus. “It’s expensive to get up here and it’s a distance thing. If I went to a school in state, they’d probably be here all the time.”

When it comes to friendships, Robin feels that she has had to renegotiate her relationships with friends from home and has actually lost contact with a number of them. She attributes this in part to the fact that she left her home region and also to her decision to attend a selective university. She shared:

A big part of being a first generation African American student is that a lot of times in your circle of friends from back home you’ll be the only one [who goes to college]. And it has a lot of different manifestations; the first is that you’re going to lose a lot of friends from home. They’re just going to go down a totally different path. It can be hard at first because, especially with someone like me who comes to a place where you don’t know anyone or anything. They’re supposed to be this foundation of familiarity and you can always come back to them, but that changes a lot and it also kind of changes your mindset.

To Robin, going to college can change people in one of two ways. Graduates can leave their home community and begin to perceive it in a negative way, or they can take what they learn from these new experiences and reinvest it in their home community. She shared:

It can go two ways; you can get this sort of elitist view point about things, or you sort of get this, I’m here for a reason and hopefully I can figure out that reason and manifest it in positive ways especially back home in my community.

**Perceived Barriers.** Robin has encountered a few personal challenges during her time at Penn that she feels are potential barriers to college persistence for African American, first generation college students like her. These specifically involved having a

support system, keeping up with her financial responsibilities, and managing her relationships with members of her home community. Her primary barrier has been the adjustment to being away from home and living in, as she described, “a completely, totally new environment.” She further explains: “I came to a city, didn’t know anybody, 800 miles from home. Completely new friends, no one that I could trust yet. It’s just a totally new environment.” Having her family as a strong support system helped her with this initial transition. She talked about the ways she could rely on them to be a listening ear, and would also serve as a source of motivation and encouragement for her to succeed in college. With time, this support system expanded to include members of the campus community through new friendships and connections with faculty and staff members who provided her with additional support and guidance as she navigates college.

Another potential barrier for Robin has been financial in nature. Robin has maintained a work-study job since her first semester, and she recognized how this commitment minimizes the time she has for her other responsibilities. As she shared: “Even though my job wasn’t demanding, I did have to go to work. And there were times that I could have been studying or sleeping, and I had to be at work.” Moreover, financial difficulties, either personally or within the family has been an issue, making it challenging at times for her to focus on her academic responsibilities. In her view, as an African American, there is “always something that we have to deal with that other people don’t understand.”

Finally, a potential barrier to college persistence that Robin has experienced is tied to the realities of being a first generation college student. As she shared: “You’re going to lose a lot of friends from home; they’re just going to go down a totally different

path...and that's been kind of hard for me." Robin still is grappling with how to come to terms with these changing relationships, but has found support and understanding from her new friends on campus, many of whom are going through similar transitions.

**Reflections.** Robin is currently a 19-year-old junior nursing major at Penn. Friendly, caring, and open to new experiences, upon graduation she aspires to become a pediatric nurse. Reflecting on the ways that her time as a student at Penn has changed her, she shared:

I've definitely changed. I just have a different relationship with different people now. Some of my home friends aren't my home friends anymore. You [just] have to make sure that you let yourself grow. You have to be unafraid to change. You don't want to stay the same person all your life. I mean that can be pretty boring if you did, so. I definitely learned a lot about allowing change to come and letting it take its course and not fighting it.

### **Tatiana**

*"I've had a lot of support from teachers, but I'd be lying saying I haven't heard 'you're not going to make it because you're a Black girl.' It's happened before."*

**Family Background.** Tatiana was born and raised in a borough of New York City. The eldest of three, she has a younger sister, a freshman at a state university on the West Coast, and a younger brother in middle school. She lived in a multi-generational household with her mother, father, and maternal grandmother. Tatiana's mother was a stay-at-home mom and her father worked as a golf instructor. Neither of Tatiana's parents has earned a college degree, although her father completed two years of study at a large, public, 4-year university in Maryland. Her grandmother earned her masters of arts in teaching and recently retired from a professional career as a teacher after 28 years of service. Tatiana grew up in a predominantly minority neighborhood where she shared that at times it felt "very much like a black hole where you're in there and it's kinda hard

to claw your way out.” Tatiana describes her family as working class socioeconomically and “very conservative Christian.”

**Educational Background.** While reflecting on the influence of her family on the importance of education, Tatiana shared: “In my house education is everything. It’s literally the end all be all. You *have* to do it, there’s no other option.” Tatiana’s parents served as inspiration for fostering college-going aspirations as life circumstances prevented them from pursuing their own postsecondary degrees. In addition to her parents, Tatiana’s maternal grandmother served as a source of support and guidance as well. A retired teacher, her college experiences and years as an educator helped foster and maintain connections with the teachers in the schools Tatiana attended. Despite having little money, Tatiana and her siblings were encouraged to think about college and were expected to earn the grades that would make admission possible.

Academically, Tatiana did well throughout grade school; she was the valedictorian for her elementary school and high school graduating classes. She attended public, neighborhood schools that were predominantly minority (Black, Latino and Asian). She credits her academic achievement to the teaching staff and described several positive encounters with teachers. A particularly noteworthy encounter was with her English teacher, who she had in eighth grade, and again as a high school senior.

Reflecting on their interactions, she explained:

He just pretty much told me that my writing was mediocre and that made me feel some type of way. But it was probably the best thing somebody ever told me. I needed that honesty. It made me step my game up. My grades got a lot better because of that. I got the English award in my [senior] class.

Teachers like this one encouraged Tatiana to become a better scholar, offered critiques of her academic skills, and challenged her to think like a college student. Tatiana took all

honors courses in high school and completed the two AP courses that were offered in English and Calculus AB. She was involved in student government, drama club, and took SAT preparatory classes with Kaplan. Tatiana also had the opportunity to take courses at a local college in New York City. Her “job” was to excel academically. This was particularly important to her parents, who did not want her to look for part-time employment during high school. On the subject of working while in high school, she emphatically stated: “Nope, school first - my family wouldn’t even let me think about working.”

Although Tatiana did well scholastically, she had some negative encounters with bullies, mostly during junior high school. She attributes her status as a target to her desire to avoid being stereotyped and was teased for “acting White.” This social criticism from her African American peers made Tatiana uncomfortable and at times question whether she was “doing something wrong” for trying to maintain good grades and “trying to make it out. Trying to do right by my God and my parents.” Other encounters with peers highlighted her sense of isolation as being one of the few African American women in her school who was excelling academically. These experiences took their toll on Tatiana. She recalls always having to work against the negativity that could potentially hinder her ability to reach her goals. As she reflected on that time her life, she shared: “I’ve had a lot of support from teachers, but I’d be lying saying I haven’t heard ‘you’re not going to make it because you’re a Black girl.’ It’s happened before.”

**College Choice Process.** As a first generation college student, Tatiana’s parents had limited information about the nuances of the college admissions process. Even her grandmother, who had earned a masters’ degree, was not too familiar with the process,



given that she followed a nontraditional pathway to and through college. Thus, Tatiana had to actively seek out other supports to navigate the college choice process. This support came from her schools' college advisor, Mr. Franklin.

For my parents, it was definitely a troubling or difficult time when I was applying because they really didn't know anything in terms of helping me out. So I was literally on my own. Thank God I had an amazing college advisor who truly is like another family member to me. It was really two people working on it...really three people: God, me and my college advisor.

Mr. Franklin was an Ivy League school graduate and former math teacher. He was instrumental in assisting Tatiana throughout the college application process and supported her with drafting her college essays and researching information about scholarship opportunities. Mr. Franklin even personally escorted Tatiana to college visits. In Tatiana's words, "He groomed me and he kind of became my cover because my parents couldn't cover me and it wasn't because they didn't want to, they didn't know how to." With his support, Tatiana was awarded a college scholarship during her junior year of high school that guaranteed full tuition, room, board, and a stipend to attend any college. This financial assistance ensured that the cost of attending college would no longer be an issue. Tatiana was able to expand her college search process and apply to whichever institution she desired.

Several factors were important to Tatiana in the college choice process. She placed a priority on being close (within a 3 hour drive) to her family, but did not want to live in New York City. Within these geographic parameters, Tatiana looked for schools with reputable business programs in the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Through research, she discovered that the Penn Wharton School was highly ranked for their undergraduate programs in business and marketing. Wharton quickly

rose to the top of her list, and became her number one choice. As she described why, she stated: “this is the best business school. If I get into Wharton, it is what it is.” After she was accepted into Penn, she visited the campus during the Multicultural Scholars Preview Program in the Spring of her senior year. This overnight program invites admitted racial minority students to campus to provide them with an in-depth look at campus life. Her experience on campus, coupled with the reputation of the institution confirmed her decision to enroll at Penn. Leading up to her first day as a college student, she anticipated being in college would be “amazing.”

***“I don’t think people realize how difficult it is being Black, especially at a PWI. It’s really hard sometimes. And you really feel outside of your comfort zone.”***

**Campus Environment.** Tatiana began her tenure at Penn as a participant in the PENNCAP Pre-Freshman Program (PFP). PFP is a four-week summer academic program consisting of counseling, academic coaching, and cultural activities. Her experience during PFP made her feel comfortable within the overall college environment, and the program provided a space to meet other people who would become long-time friends. Through this program, Tatiana met her current roommate and made lasting connections with the program staff. They were more than just peers and support staff: “My best friend and my roommate - they are an extension of me in my opinion. They are like a brother and sister to me; that’s family.” These individuals also served as her support system during challenging times. “When I couldn’t get in touch with my parents, PFP was that place.” All in all, being in PFP afforded Tatiana access to a critical campus network. “I loved that program. Having extra credits is nice, but also it’s a great group of people. A lot of resources.”

Raised and educated in predominantly minority communities, Tatiana was excited about going to Penn for the opportunity to meet and interact with White people.

Unfortunately, these expectations were not fully met. Laughing, she shared:

Outside of my best friend (a White male) and a few others, I have almost no White friends which is weird to me because I used to get made fun of for you know “talking White” or “acting White.” So I thought if anyone would understand that, it would be White people.

In her attempt to expand her social network on campus, Tatiana experienced a bit of an identity crisis of sorts. As she explained further, it was “not my own identity in terms of who I was and my character, but how my character was placed within the scheme of the school.” These experiences led her to reflect upon the ways that her upbringing, racial background, and gender influenced the ways she perceived and was perceived by members of the campus community.

**Academic Climate and Culture.** The primary word Tatiana used to describe the academic climate and culture within Wharton School of Business at Penn was “competitive.” This academic climate differed from her precollege academic experiences, and took time to adjust to. She explained: “I was a very driven kid, but I wasn’t competitive. They’re both.” Consequently, her first couple of years at Penn were challenging for her because she did not experience the same levels of collaboration and open support as she had in high school. Moreover, Tatiana felt that, in contrast with her African American peers, the White and Asian students in her classes were less inclined to include her as a part of their study groups or group projects. Tatiana elaborated further on the context by sharing:

Nothing is more awkward than being the only Black person in the class [and] you don’t know *nobody* in the class. Then you have to do a group project. I want to

go to the professor and be like 'just put me anywhere. I don't wanna - don't make me do this.'

Given these early interactions with her peers, Tatiana felt very isolated early on in her academic career.

I felt like nobody had me, nobody had my back or had my covering and so I felt very overwhelmed by that and I was very overwhelmed by the fast-paced mentality of it all. My parents were there, you know, my friends were there, but deep down inside I felt really alone.

After her sophomore year, Tatiana began tapping into the academic resources on campus, developed more effective study habits, and became more selective in the classes she chose – opting for grouping classes with friends when possible and balancing out her schedule with electives. Having the opportunity to take classes outside of the Wharton School also helped mitigate her early feelings of academic isolation. Specifically, Tatiana described one of her professors as an ally who constantly provided her with positive feedback on her work, and openly acknowledged her successes in class. The Caucasian professor, who teaches in the Japanese studies program, has even invited the class over to her house for hand-rolled sushi.

**Social Climate and Culture.** In terms of Penn's social climate, the words and phrases Tatiana used to describe her first semester at Penn were "uncomfortable," "stressful," and "no covering." First, she viewed the campus as segregated in ways that go beyond race. "It's a lot of socioeconomic segregation. It's a lot of public school versus private school segregation. It's a lot of urban versus suburban segregation. By that standard, I was really at the bottom of the totem pole." This meant that being an African American student, who attended public schools and whose family did not make a lot of money made her different from her same race peers as well as different from the

majority White students on campus. Despite early challenges finding her niche on campus, Tatiana has been able to cultivate a small network of friends (mostly minorities) who are supportive. She shared:

The friends that I have now are the people I can actually see me still being friends with after I graduate, which was new to me. I feel like a lot of the people I interacted with growing up I wouldn't necessarily be friends with from the past leaving New York. Having gone here, it increased my trust in others.

Tatiana is actively involved in a select group of African American focused organizations, staying involved mostly because of the people in these organizations. As her friends begin graduating, she is happy to have alumni support, yet acknowledged that none of them are also Wharton students.

**Returning Home.** As Tatiana continues to grow and mature, traveling back to her home neighborhood in New York City comes with mixed emotions. While she is appreciative of the opportunity to attend a prestigious college, she recognizes that leaving home has opened her eyes to the disparities between her home and college communities.

It's weird coming back to the city that you came from and you view it as a different way. I've always viewed it, as "My God, we need to do better." But now going off to college it's like "My God, we *really* need to do better." Especially when walking around the neighborhood with Penn paraphernalia and it's like "oh you go to college." It was very weird. [You] come back with different, fresh eyes it's like "wow, I'm so glad I left, and I don't regret it, not one bit."

During Tatiana's junior year at Penn, her parents and siblings left New York and permanently relocated to the West Coast. Given her close relationship with her family, the separation from them has been more pronounced, especially around the holidays. Traveling opportunities are limited because of her family's limited financial resources and her scholarship only pays for two trips home per academic year. Yet through it all, Tatiana's parents have been a major source of support. "In the total all four years, the

only thing that stayed consistent was the amount of love that I got from home, the amount of support, and most importantly the amount of understanding.” Tatiana also described her relationship with her younger sister, a college freshman in the state where her family now lives. Though their schedules prevent consistent communication, she stated: “We have this unspoken understanding that if you need me, call me.” They occasionally swap stories about their college experiences and what has happened on their respective campuses, which she feels she can do now more so than when her sister was still in high school. Recognizing the differences between her and her sister however, she feels that it’s important for her sister to learn and grow from her own experiences in college and not be overly influenced by her experiences. She shared: “I’ve heard too much and it was hard for me to deal with. I want her to learn herself how to deal with it, ‘cause nobody gave me that manual.”

**Perceived Barriers.** Tatiana believes there are several barriers to college persistence for first generation, African American students at Penn. The three she highlighted were maintaining a personal support system, racism, and the academic competitiveness at Wharton. First, she described the importance of maintaining a personal support system to help manage the transition from high school to college, from childhood to adulthood. She emphasized that given her experiences, this transition is particularly intimidating for minority students attending predominantly White universities given the differing cultures between the two environments. She shared, “being a minority at a PWI can definitely be daunting and it can really put you on the brink of craziness because you feel so uncomfortable in your own skin.”

Tatiana also acknowledged that she has encountered a number of explicit and implicit instances of racism, or the perception of differential treatment by the basis of her race/ethnicity. She stated: “There’s a lot of White students who are really disrespectful, unintentionally and intentionally.” She feels this also contributed to the difficulties she’s had with cultivating academic relationships with non-Black students in her Wharton courses. She attributes these encounters to the limited opportunities that White and Asian students have with engaging with Black and other minority students prior to college.

Finally, Tatiana feels that the academic competitiveness of the Wharton School constrains students’ opportunities for success, both academically and professionally. Not only do students compete with one another for grades, but they also compete for internship opportunities through the Wharton alumni network.

Wharton in particular - the competitiveness is ridiculous. People are very cutthroat in that environment. It’s a make it or break it environment. I don’t think they mean to do it, but I wish they knew that it breaks a lot of kids’ hearts. It totally crushed me my first couple of years.

With time and the support of the staff in the PENNCAP program, Tatiana has learned where to go for help and has sought out key peers to support her academically. She has also developed the courage to follow a non-traditional career track and seek out opportunities in the field of marketing, despite criticism that she should follow the more lucrative track in finance and accounting like the majority of Wharton graduates. For her, it’s not about following the grain, it’s about doing what makes her happy.

I risk a lot of really great opportunities just to do what I want to do. I’ve had a lot of people tell me I’m stupid for doing it, but I don’t care. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been doing what I love to do, so I have no regrets.

**Reflections.** Introspective, energetic, and resilient, Tatiana is currently a 21-year old marketing major at Penn. Upon graduation, she will begin a full-time position with a

well-established company doing brand marketing. Her time at Penn was filled with opportunities for self-discovery and has afforded her the space to figure out who she truly is apart from how others may perceive her.

Everything I expected I was going to do, I did not do at all. I struggled a lot. But in retrospect, I think if it wasn't for me struggling, I wouldn't be in the position I am in now. I've very happy and comfortable with where I'm at. I'm living my own life and you're not going to make me uncomfortable in my own skin.

### **Summary of Case Profiles**

This chapter provided detailed profiles for each of the five participants in this study based upon their demographic questionnaire responses and individual semi-structured interviews. Through these case profiles, participants' academic, social, and personal experiences are described in relation to their family background, precollege experiences, and experiences at Penn. Their stories highlight the similarities and differences in students' academic and social experiences at Penn, as well as their perceptions of the barriers to college persistence. In the next chapter, Chapter 5, I provide a cross-case analysis of these students' experiences and discuss the findings in relation to my conceptual framework and available literature on the topic.



## Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

This study sought to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of five African American, first generation college women at the University of Pennsylvania. Through demographic questionnaire responses and individual semi-structured interviews, the participants identified the ways that their collegiate experiences were shaped by their social identities, precollege academic and social experiences, and interactions with members of their campus and home communities. The research questions were as follows:

- 1) How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 2) How do African American, first generation college students describe their social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 3) How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence?

This chapter begins with a discussion of three distinct themes that emerged from the data that were outside of research framework. These themes are 1) intersectionality, 2) gender, and 3) spirituality. I then turn to a discussion of the findings, which address the research questions and the study's conceptual framework. For clarity and structure, these findings are organized into three subsections to reflect each research question as follows: 1) academic experiences, 2) social experiences, and 3) barriers to college

persistence. In my discussion, I include analysis of the findings in relation to available literature on the themes presented.

### **Emergent Themes**

The ways that students described their academic and social experiences attending Penn suggests that their experiences were intricately linked with their identity. Students discussed how five salient aspects of their identity, their race, academic sense of self, gender, class, and spirituality, influenced how they individually engaged with the college environment and their perceptions of various members of the campus community. This finding can be organized into three overlapping themes. The first is **intersectionality**, where students' experiences reveal a myriad of ways that the various aspects of their identity intersect with one another to shape their experiences. **Gender** also serves as an organizing principle as students provided examples of how their family role as daughters and sisters, as well as women within their home and community contexts, shaped their experiences. The final theme, **spirituality**, emerged as an important aspect of students' identity which served as a guide for how students lived their daily lives. Students' spiritual sense of self served also as an internal source of strength, particularly during times of challenge. Taken together, these findings illustrate the complexity of how one's identity shapes the nature of student's academic and social experiences both prior to, and while attending college.

**Intersectionality.** The ways students described their academic and social experiences highlight the various ways that different aspects of their identity intersected with one another to shape their perceptions of their environment and their interactions with members in their community both at home and in college. Jones and McEwen

(2000) posit that identity is socially constructed: a reflection of the historical, cultural, and social context of the human experience within a particular society. Identity is also multifaceted, with various components constantly intersecting with one another.

Intersectionality is a concept used to explore the complexities of identity and *how* social identities operate together and simultaneously structures the experiences of individuals (Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Shields, 2008). An intersectional approach to understanding students' experience focuses primarily on students' own understanding of their identity and experiences of difference, the influence of the multiple dimensions of identity on an evolving sense of self, and on the ways context shapes experiences and perceptions of one's environment (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Through individual interviews and demographic questionnaire responses, students acknowledged specific social identities in terms of their race, gender, and class. Each of the five students in this study identified as African American women. In terms of their socioeconomic status, all participants were first generation college students, and demographic questionnaires revealed that two participants identified themselves as lower class, one as working class, one as working/middle class, and one participant identified herself as middle class. With the exception of one student who was raised in what she considered a diverse neighborhood, participants were raised in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Though not traditionally defined as a social identity, students repeatedly referenced their academic sense of self as a salient identity. Their academic profiles reveal a history of academic achievement that began in elementary school. Each student maintained honor roll status from elementary through high school; three of the five participants were elementary school valedictorians, one was an elementary school

salutatorian, and three of the five participants were high school valedictorians. These background characteristics are important to detail. Recently, scholars have investigated how the concept of intersectionality can be applied to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of Black collegians (see Strayhorn, 2013). Their studies have demonstrated that within the Black college student population, there is great variation in the ways students identify in terms of their race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and religion. From their analysis, they suggest that future research concerning Black college students should explicitly explore the ways that students connect with their identity and the ways various aspects of students' identity influence their educational aspirations, perceptions of the campus environment, and experiences within institutions of higher education (Strayhorn, 2013). Consistent with these assertions, the participants in this study reflected on their academic and social experiences at home and in college, while implicitly and explicitly connecting these experiences to various intersecting aspects of their identity.

*Race and Academic Sense of Self.* Students' race and academic ability emerged as essential components of their identity; both influenced how students interacted with and were perceived by others in their home and college communities. Their stories reveal that their awareness of the ways these two identities intersect with one another surfaced during their precollege experience. Participants shared that as early as middle school, they began to recognize the ways that their personal emphasis on academic achievement set them apart from some of their African American peers. Alysha, a college junior majoring in marketing, described how during middle and high school being perceived as "smart" isolated her from the other Black students in her school, despite

attending a school for high achieving students. Alysha shared that she had difficulty fitting in and making close friends within her Black peer group. She explained:

There was a lot of having to fit in...back then trying to make friends was always like [a] competition...it was really, really tough. There was I guess, 20 African American kids in my class [of 118] enrolled, and the rest were Caucasian, a few Asian. Of course [I] would like try a Black person to fit in with, but I just didn't because I was the smart girl. When it comes to that school, they think everybody is smart, and everybody has intelligence if you work - apply it, but I was one of three Black girls who actually applied it. So that caused a rift in how I got along with the other girls through high school. It was [eventually] settled, but growing up it was hard trying to deal with that in the social aspect.

Alysha attended a selective, predominantly White school from fifth through twelfth grades. Within this environment, she wanted to cultivate meaningful friendships with the few Black students in her class year. Despite her intentions, however, she was not accepted within this group due to her perceived difference. Within her school setting, being *too* smart was associated with “acting White” (see Fordham, 1988). Fordham (2008) writes: African Americans who are accused of acting White are inevitably displaced...perceived as matter out of place...forced to fight to retain citizenship in the Black community while concurrently seeking acceptance by the hegemonic White society” (p. 232). As a result of this perceived difference, Alysha experienced social isolation from her Black peer group.

Tatiana, a college senior majoring in marketing, described how she also encountered negative peer experiences in middle school, primarily due to her commitment to maintaining good grades. Tatiana attended a public, predominantly Black middle school. Instead of mere social isolation in this setting, she experienced teasing and bullying due to her academic focus. She shared:

My experience in public school, it definitely was hard. I got bullied very severely, mostly in junior high school, because I was trying not to be stereotyped. I was just trying to make it out. I was just trying to do right by my God and my parents. That's really it, but I got bullied. "You talk White...you're trying to be something you're not." And it still bothers me to this day. I don't understand where this notion that being intelligent is being White [comes from]... Why can't I just be me? I never will understand that.

These two examples illustrate the social and psychological challenges experienced by high achieving African American students as they grapple with the complex interplay between their racial identity and academic sense of self. Whether in predominantly White or predominantly minority school settings, each of these participants had their racial identity challenged by those who believed that academic success is synonymous with abandoning ones' Black identity, and as a result, experienced social isolation and alienation (Fries-Britt, 1998; MacLeod, 2009). Alysha and Tatiana's experiences mirror those highlighted in previous studies exploring the experiences of Black students identified as *high achieving* or *gifted*. As African American high achievers, their identities place them simultaneously in two groups that have been both marginalized and privileged within educational settings (Griffin & Perez, 2013). As a result, these students often encounter complex social and emotional adjustment issues as they attempted to navigate these two spaces beginning in elementary school and continuing through their collegiate experiences (Bonner, 2000; Ford, 1995; Griffin, 2006; Harris, Palmer, & Strauve, 2011).

In college, high achieving students may face "black achiever isolation," where in addition to experiencing isolation as a minority student attending a predominantly White institution, they also encounter similar experiences of isolation from other Black college students due to their academic ability (Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1998; Harper,

2006). Having become aware of the ways that her academic sense of self differentiated her from her African American peers, perceptions of *fit* was a critical factor in Alysha's college choice process. Fit in this sense, is a psychological concept, which refers to the perception of cohesion between self and the surrounding environment (see Bean & Eaton, 2000; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Haussman et al., 2007). While the schools' reputation and the strength of their academic programs were important criteria under consideration during her college choice process, so was the potential for opportunities to connect with and establish peer relationships with other African American students. From her first visit to Penn's campus, Alysha expressed how she immediately felt connected within the Black community. She shared:

I did Multicultural Scholars Preview [senior year of high school and] I left with the feeling that I have to go there. [They] took me around to meet some other educated Black people, if you would call them [that], and I just fell in love with being here...I enjoyed just knowing I would be around people of like the same level as me. [When] we get in here, the assumption is that you're already smart, so you can throw that out of the window and just get to know people for who they are. And I just loved it; I told my mom I have to go here because I finally feel like I'm in a place where I fit in. I *have* to.

Alysha, as well as the other students in the study, talked about how Penn was their first experience in an environment where the majority of African American students were heavily invested in their academic success. In this sense, they were not perceived as "different" from other members of the Black community on campus and did not experience black achiever isolation. With time, students were able to cultivate multiple meaningful connections with peers within the Black community through informal interactions and participation in campus activities and organizations. This finding suggests that within this institutional context (namely a highly selective university), high achieving Black students in college can indeed find "like-type" communities of color

consisting of other high achieving Black students (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Padilla et al., 1997). Fries-Britt's (1998) study of the nature of collegiate experience for high achieving Black students attending a public, predominantly White campus found that membership in a race-specific honors program helped students establish peer networks to diminish feelings of isolation due to their race and academic ability. In her study, students attended a large public, open-access institution in contrast to the medium sized, private, selective context of the University of Pennsylvania. Within the context of Penn, students perceived the vast majority of their peers as high achieving, opening up opportunity to find multiple connections with other high achieving students of color. The findings from the present study suggest that black achiever isolation may be a reflection of the institutional setting (e.g. public versus private; open-access versus selective) and the diversity of the student body attending a particular institution.

*Race, class, and academic sense of self.* Students also described the ways their class identity intersected with their race and academic identities to shape their college expectations and their academic and social experiences once they arrived on Penn's campus. This theme emerged as students explained their college choice process and perceptions of the Penn environment. First, students grew up in households where they were encouraged to pursue higher education and were made aware of scholarship opportunities that favored academically talented students from lower-income and minority communities. For students who grew up in lower class and working class families, this salient class status actually fostered their perception that there were indeed opportunities for them to attend some of the best colleges in the nation, including higher price, highly selective colleges and universities. Leila, a communication major and



junior at Penn, was her high school valedictorian and had strong SAT scores. Although her family did not have a lot of financial resources, she was confident that her educational background made her a good fit for an Ivy League institution. She shared:

I felt that I fit the profile...colleges have this recruiting effort to find diverse students, especially first generation [college] students. [Also] based on the financial aid policies of specifically Ivy League schools, I just felt like I had a good chance of getting in and that it would work out best for me financially.

Leila's academic performance, coupled with her knowledge of financial aid policies for students with financial need, prompted her to apply only to highly selective colleges and universities. This finding suggests that notwithstanding class status, when high achieving minority students from lower-income backgrounds have access to information about financing college, they are encouraged to apply to and enroll at some of the more high price institutions. Patrice, a senior and chemistry major at Penn, described how initially, her family was very concerned about their ability to afford a private institution in general, and Penn in particular. After receiving her financial aid package and sharing that information with her parents, Patrice was able to ease these concerns for her family. She shared:

The [schools] I applied to were a little more expensive, but I knew they would be sensitive to need...looking at Penn's sticker price [laughter] that's a big, big, big turn off for a lot of people, but their financial aid is very good...I pay almost nothing to come here so that's really, really nice.

This finding expands previous scholarship exploring the influences of finances on college access and choice (e.g. McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Perna, 2006; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Across all communities, the perceptions of college cost oftentimes exceed reality. Those who have more experience with higher education are often privy to more information about the various ways to finance college, including financial aid. First

generation college students often have more limited information about the affordability of higher education. McDonough and Calderone (2006) found that individuals make decisions about the affordability of higher education based on their habitus, or home community. As a result, students from communities where college attendance is not prevalent may have little information about ways to finance higher education as well as the differences in availability of financial aid across institutional types (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Choy, 2001; Perna, 2006). Contrary to previous research, each student in this study was aware of the various financial aid policies of selective institutions, suggesting that either access to this information is becoming more available (Perna, 2006; Venegas, 2006), or that as high achieving students from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education (e.g. African Americans, first generation, lower-income) they were selected out and specifically educated with this information (Harper & Griffin, 2011; McDonough, 1997).

Although students did not allow perceptions of cost and affordability to prevent them from applying to and enrolling at Penn, they did recognize how their class identity shaped their experiences on campus. This theme emerged as students described their perceptions of the campus community. First, students implicitly and explicitly understood that Penn's campus consists predominantly of affluent students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participants who identified as coming from lower and working class backgrounds were more explicit in their acknowledgement that there were few students on campus whose economic background was similar to their own. Leila, who is from a lower class economic background, described the context:

Penn often in a lot of publication reports that about 70 percent of the student body is on financial aid, and that is supposed to represent that Penn is striving to

include students of different economic backgrounds...but people need to know that within that 70 percent there is a wide difference [in aid awarded]...we don't have students from a wide range of economic backgrounds. I think those coming from working class, or even from families below the poverty line, it's a very, very, very small minority on campus.

Students identified class distinctions on campus that were displayed in students' dress, social activities, and international experience. They talked about how their limited financial resources made it challenging to keep up with their more affluent peers. To compensate, students talked about the ways they would purchase designer brand clothes at discount stores and how they were very selective in the social activities in which they participated. Due to their limited financial resources, students often had to opt-out of activities such as off campus parties or trips to restaurants because they could not afford it; at times using homework as an excuse not to attend. Opportunities for traveling abroad are still difficult but participants shared that they have been inspired by the experiences of their peers and look forward to these opportunities after graduation.

Notwithstanding these highlighted examples of difference, the participants in this study rarely explicitly talked about class or how their class identity shaped their academic and social experiences in college. Previous research exploring issues of class suggest that when students' class identity differs substantially from other members of the campus community, this perception of difference can contribute to an increased awareness of class identity (e.g. Aries & Seider, 2005; Bergerson, 2007; Ostrove & Cole, 2003). Aries and Seider's (2005) study of class explored the college experiences of White students attending an elite university. They found that significant disparities of wealth between lower-income and affluent students on campus heightened awareness of class, and led to feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, deficiency, exclusion, and

powerlessness among lower income students. The differences between the experiences of students in the present study and previous research further illustrate how the intersection of one's race and class identities may contribute to the differences in perceptions of the campus environment across and within racial groups (Brown & Jayakumar, 2013). Participants in the present study shared that they were not very concerned with the class status of their White and Asian peers. While they were aware of the class differences within the African American community on campus, they still found the community to be unified and appreciative of the differences across the group.

*Intersections beyond race.* Building upon the previous finding, within the Black community at Penn students were at times aware of the similarities and differences between themselves and other members of the Black community based upon their social identities. Students shared examples of how being Black and a first generation college student, or Black and from a family that didn't make a lot of money, shaped their experiences and interactions with others. Participants often encountered African American peers who grew up in suburban neighborhoods, attended private schools through high school, or grew up in financially stable families. These differences in backgrounds often led to the formation of different "sub-communities" or small groups on campus that reflected these backgrounds. Tatiana, captured the essence of her experience "at the intersections" within the Penn environment. She shared:

In my opinion, there's a lot of self-segregation on campus, and it goes beyond race. Some segregation is primarily race. [But,] it's a lot of socioeconomic segregation. It's a lot of public school versus private school segregation. It's a lot of urban versus suburban segregation.

In Tatiana's experience, students would connect with one another based upon shared precollege background and experiences. While there were some racially based grouping

of students on campus, she also observed within and across race clustering by students' socioeconomic status – where more affluent students, students who attended private schools and grew up in more suburban environments, were more likely to associate with one another. Given her background, she felt like an outsider, particularly within her academic community as a student in the Wharton School of Business. She continued:

I was really at the bottom of the totem pole. Inner city, Black, female, public school all of my life, parents don't make that much money... I felt really out of place. I don't know about the college in general, but [in] Wharton...I felt real uncomfortable there. I didn't feel like I belonged.

Throughout her time at the Penn Tatiana was consciously aware of how her socioeconomic status, race, and gender made her different from her peers. Ostrove and Long (2007) posit that educational institutions have “class- (and gender-, race-, and ability-) based markers that define, implicitly or explicitly, who “belongs” and who does not on campus” (p. 335). As a result of the perceived difference between Tatiana's background and the predominant background of the members of the campus community, Tatiana, particularly during her first two years in college, did not feel that she belonged at Penn. These findings highlight the challenges experienced by students as they attempt to break down stereotypes held based upon their racial, gendered, and class identities and find spaces where they felt accepted for the totality of who they were, and a sense of belonging within institutions of higher education (Griffin & Perez, 2013).

**Gender.** Another aspect of students' identity that emerged as an important factor in understanding their academic and social experiences was gender. Students provided examples of how their family role as daughters and sisters, as well being women within their home and community contexts, shaped their experiences both at home and on campus. First as daughters, students talked about the expectations from their parents to

be academically focused and personally responsible for their actions, and the perceived differences between the expectations from parents for them versus their brothers. As sisters, students were expected to be a positive role model for their siblings and serve as a guide for their younger siblings as they navigated their college choice process. As women, students shared a duality in expectations coming from both their home and collegiate communities. At home, they were sometimes seen in negative stereotypes, at other times they were “put on a pedestal” for their accomplishments to date. In college, they dealt with the pressures associated with high expectations for achievement, while at the same time felt empowered to explore their independence and womanhood. Each of these distinctions is discussed next.

*Daughters.* The participants in this study shared the ways that as daughters, their parents set certain expectations for them in terms of their behavior and academic performance. The high standards for academic success put upon them by their parents helped students to internalize their own positive values about education. Alysha is the oldest child in a family of three, and the only girl. Growing up she felt her parents were very strict with her academically and socially in comparison to her younger brothers. She shared:

[My mother] was always on top of me getting good grades. I kind of set myself up [for success] in a way because I wasn't allowed to bring home anything lower than a B. Where my brothers, [the message was] you know, 'do your best, sweetie, just pass everything,' which to me wasn't really fair.

Alysha went on to connect these parenting approaches to the differences in the ways that African American men and women are treated in educational settings. While her parents were strict with her in terms of keeping a close watch on her academics and the people

she associated with, any positive accomplishments of her brothers was rewarded in order to encourage them to continue on a solid track academically (MacLeod, 2009).

Robin, a junior at Penn studying nursing, also described the differences between her parents' approaches to education for her compared to her younger brother, and the potential implications for his college experience. Within Robin's family, education was a high priority. In an attempt to provide their children with the best educational foundation possible, Robin and her brother initially were enrolled in private schools. When the family could no longer afford to send both of their children to private school, the decision was made for Robin to move to public schools for middle and high school while her younger brother remained in private schools through high school. In Robin's view, this was primarily due to concerns that as a African American male, it was extremely important that her brother have the most consistent academic experience possible. She explained:

So my brother did go to private school and now he's at an elite university. I think my mom and dad kind of felt like if he was at public school then it wouldn't be the case...If he was around too much of the nonsense, the violence, or what naturally comes when you're in a really cultural sort of area that it would have too big of an impact and it would change the way things turn out...Don't know why it's different for girls, I guess we [have] a different thought process; we use [those experiences] to excel – I don't know?

Given these decisions, Robin's brother had a very structured and sheltered precollege experience and entered college with a strong academic foundation. Robin shared her concern however that he may be distracted by the social aspects of college now that he is away from home attending college in Florida. She explained:

I do fear a little bit with the whole social thing. Unlike me, my brother stayed in the same school for a really long time. I was kind of the guinea pig, going from school to school...he [also] didn't get a car until his senior year so it was him and

my mom every day, driving to school. So, I had a little fear that with the extreme change in scenery and day to day life that things might get a little warped for him and he might lose sight [on his education].

Also as daughters, parents expressed their concerns about where students should go for college. Proximity to home was an important factor in students' college choice process in order to maintain connections with their parents and family (Turley, 2006). Participants talked about how their college choice set included at least one institution that was located within an hour's drive of their home neighborhoods. Being close to home was particularly important for Patrice's parents, especially her mother. Patrice is a first generation Black immigrant; she was born in the New York while her parents were born and raised in Africa. Patrice talked about how her mother was very reluctant to allow her to attend college too far away from home, especially since she graduated from high school early. Her mother's trepidation, in her view, came from her parents' cultural heritage as African immigrants. Although Patrice expressed her desire to fulfill her parent's wishes by staying close to home, she personally was open to attending an array of colleges within the northeast region of the United States. By emphasizing the opportunities afforded to her by attending an Ivy League institution, she was able to convince her parents to allow her to attend Penn. Her next sister, however, stayed in-state to attend a university closer to home.

Patrice explained:

It's their culture that the girls are supposed to stay in the house and not sort of live very far by themselves and things like that...My parents actually wanted me to transfer back to a school in New York but I didn't want to so I just stayed here.

For Patrice, her family values and traditions were deeply connected with her African ethnic heritage. Literature exploring African immigrant family relationships emphasizes



the heavy influence of parents on the educational outcomes and plans of their children (see Baum & Flores, 2011; Griffin et al., 2012; Nicholas, Stepick, & Stepick, 2008).

Patrice ultimately decided to continue her education at Penn, showing that as a child born and raised in the United States, her ties to her family may be different from students who immigrated to this country later in life.

In summary, as daughters participants described the various ways parents shaped their academic behaviors and college choice process. Parents held their daughters to high educational expectations, which over time translated into academic success as well as personal identification with students' academic sense of self. Students also highlighted the perceived differences in their upbringing (e.g. greater emphasis on academic achievement, earlier curfews) compared to their siblings, and credited many of these differences to gendered expectations. These findings suggest that parenting styles of African American parents may vary across gender, and has potential implications for the development of college going aspirations, college enrollment, and college persistence (Baum & Flores, 2011; Conley, 2005; Griffin et al., 2012; Lareau, 2003).

*Sisters.* A second theme that emerged as it relates to gender was students' roles as sisters and the ways they interacted with their siblings. Interestingly, four of the five students in this study, Alysha, Patrice, Robin, and Tatiana are each the eldest child in their families. Growing up in the same homes and attending the same schools, siblings potentially exert a great deal of influence on one another (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Sanders & Campling, 2004; Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). As first generation college students, the students in this study served as role models for not only the college choice process, but as they successfully persist toward graduation, for college completion as

well. Each participant has a sibling (in Leila's case, an older sibling) who is currently pursuing postsecondary education. They described the opportunities to discuss their college choice process and subsequent experiences with their siblings. Patrice, for example, assisted her younger sister through the college choice process and has provided her with some tips regarding navigating college. She shared:

My next younger sister...is in her sophomore year at college [in New York state]. She asked me...SAT questions, how I studied, how far I applied, so she would know in terms of not scaring my parents. Also stuff like ... what kind of jobs I had [in college] and financial aid questions...[also] what grades I got first semester and what's acceptable and what's not.

Building from Patrice's example, participants used their own experiences to provide tips and suggestions for how their siblings could successfully navigate college. Robin, reflecting on her challenges adjusting to the academic rigors of college, shared some academic advice with her younger brother as he navigated his first semester of college. She shared: "I've given him all I can...like 'bruh, it's going to be hard, please ask for help, don't wait until the last minute.' Like the real cliché [tips] that you hope doesn't go in one ear and out the other."

Participants shared how they attempted to maintain strong connections with their siblings once they left home for college. Tatiana described her close relationship with her sister and best friend, who was a college freshman at an institution on the West Coast. Tatiana shared: "My sister, we don't talk that much, because she's in school so I get it. But we have an unspoken understanding that like if you need me, call me." Generally, relationships between siblings changed once younger siblings entered college. In this sense, students talked about their concern that their personal academic successes and descriptions of their collegiate experiences have put unfair pressures upon their younger

siblings to succeed. Leila talked about how her expectations for college were shaped by the stories shared by her oldest sister, a graduate of a selective university in the Southern region of the United States. These expectations, particularly within the social realm of college were not met by her own college experiences. She shared:

When I was considering transferring at the end of sophomore year, [my sister] never said anything but she'd notice [beforehand] when I would talk on the phone with her like I never really seemed happy. When she was in college she always had great stories to tell but I never really had that.

Participants also talked about the differences in personality between themselves and their siblings, and how it would be unfair for their parents to expect their siblings to approach education in the same ways that they did. The difficulty in managing these sibling relationships is evidenced in the way Alysha described her interaction with her younger brother, who recently transitioned from a four-year college to a local community college:

I just apologized to him. I said "I'm sorry if me being me stopped you from being you." And he's like: "Don't ever apologize for that. You're doing what you're supposed to do, even if I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do. So, don't stop doing what you're supposed to do." That was a really deep conversation that we really needed to have for a while.

These findings illustrate the unique role that siblings play in the college choice processes and subsequent college experiences of students in general, and first generation, African American college students in particular. While there is a great deal of research about the role of families, few studies have explicitly explored the role of siblings in the college choice process, and subsequent experiences (Elías McAllister, 2012). Collins and Laursen (2004) found that sibling relationships are important sources of influence, friendship, and affection, as well as conflict. Tucker, Barber, and Eccles (1997) concluded that older siblings are often viewed as a source of support and knowledge by younger siblings, and can exert influence on their younger siblings' goals and interests.

Yet, the findings from the current study also suggest that when older siblings talk to younger siblings about their life plans and provide advice about college, it can potentially lead to strife within the sibling-sibling relationship. The findings in the area of siblings suggest that the educational trajectory of the eldest child in a family, either positive or negative, can potentially influence the college choice decisions and collegiate experiences younger siblings.

***Women at home.*** More broadly as women, students talked about some of the ways that their gender influenced their experiences within their home and campus communities. This primarily came up as students described what it was like returning home during college breaks and their interactions with other students on campus. First, students grew up keenly aware of the various portrayals of African American women, both positive and negative, within their community. Tatiana described the prevalence of negative depictions in her home community:

[There are] so many different stereotypes of Black women in general, from the media to politics, to just *everywhere*. We don't necessarily get a break and that's how I've always felt. We really get a large chunk of like crap, or whatever, if I can say that.

Students recounted a few negative personal experiences that they attributed to their identity as Black women. Some have experienced objectification from men who called them out for their physical attributes. Leila has experienced this while visiting her home community. She shared: "It's like I can't walk down the street without being catcalled...I just don't like being in that [environment]. My father has to drive me everywhere now. I don't even feel comfortable walking." To combat negative experiences, students talked about the implicit and explicit ways they tried to highlight positive portrayals of Black women and serve as positive role models in the community.

Even then, they were seen as “elitist” in the eyes of some members of the community, and subject to scrutiny or antagonism. Returning home for college during breaks, Tatiana notices the new ways she is viewed by members of her home community. She shared:

It’s weird coming back to the city that you came from and you view it in a different way. Especially if I’m walking around in my Penn or my Wharton hoodie (sweatshirt) and people are looking at me like “Oh you go to college” and things like that. It was weird. It was very weird.

Students also shared that they had to be careful not to be too boastful about their accomplishments, because it could sometimes be used as a way to divide them from members of their home communities. Alysha explicated her experiences returning home, and the ways that her gender influenced the ways she was perceived in her home community.

When I get home my family puts me on a pedestal...and I don’t really know how to talk about stuff because I don’t want to make my little cousins feel bad. On top of all that I am a girl, and I didn’t have a baby by the time I was 16 and all of them did. [My parents are] telling them, “why can’t you be smart like Alysha, why can’t you be just like Alysha?” You can’t do that! Mess up their psyche? They’re going to grow up believing they can’t accomplish anything. I mean, what are you doing?

These experiences illustrate the duality that Black college women may experience as they negotiate the varying expectations for them within their home community. They strive to exude confidence and positivity, but at the same time they can be perceived as boastful and elitist.

***Women on campus.*** Students also shared the influence of their race and gender on their experiences as college students within the campus context of Penn. This came up during interactions with peers across racial groups as well as interactions with males on campus. Given students’ awareness of the prevalence of negative stereotypes

surrounding the African American community in general, and Black women in particular, they entered college aware of the ways they consciously attempted to embody positive attributes of their race and gender. Initially, going to college presented an opportunity for students to explore the various aspects of their identity, and redefine who they were becoming versus who they were in high school. This period of transformation for Alysha began during her participation in the PENNCAP summer bridge program prior to beginning freshman year. She shared:

What PENNCAP really allowed me to do personally was just kind of find myself and who I wanted to be on campus versus how I was in high school. Kind of learning what my strengths were, what I like doing, feeling out [my] personality...just a lot. That really just opened up everything.

As students engaged with various members of the campus community, over time they expanded their definitions of self and expanded their educational and professional aspirations. They talked about maintaining a small, close group of African American female friends as well as relationships with individuals (both male and female) from diverse backgrounds. These friendships were often cultivated through shared personal and professional interests or with individuals with similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

While college was a space for exploration, students also talked about the struggles they endured as they strove for academic success. Students talked about the challenges of managing the pressures on them from home to do well and not “end up” confirming negative stereotypes. Alysha shared the pressures she experienced trying to achieve on campus:

So when I come back [to hometown] I'm like the one girl who did it right...I'm like I don't want all of this, I just want to be me and be happy. I can't mess up. Like if I were to mess up here...hell would break loose in [hometown]! So the spotlight is always there...They're just waiting for something bad. Yeah. I can't

let that happen. It's like the pressure, because I feel like if I wanted to quit, I can't.

On a more positive note, students implied that being on campus and interacting with others with similar backgrounds has helped them find balance in managing these expectations from others and staying true to their own sense of self. Each participant shared some of the ways that their time at Penn shifted their sense of self and expectations for the future. Tatiana shared:

It's kind of an uphill battle initially when coming here because you want to dispel every stereotype. Like "I'm more than this [stereotype]". [You're] spending [so much] time trying to dispel stereotypes, [that] you forget to live. I'm just trying to live. To be happy. To be myself. And if people don't like it, then that's fine. I'm not trying to please people. I'm just trying to please me.

These findings highlight the value added by exploring gender identity with college students as they attempt to move from externally defined gender roles and expectations to those that are salient for them (Patton & McClure, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b).

**Spirituality.** Although participants were not asked about their religious beliefs or practices, the final identity theme, spirituality, emerged as students attempted to make sense of, and deal with their overall life choices and experiences. There is growing evidence that spirituality is a critical identity among college students (Dancy, 2010; Stewart, 2008; 2009; Watt, 2003). As the distinctions between spirituality and religiosity are often blurred, it is important to establish the definition through which I framed these findings (Berkel, Armstrong & Cokley, 2004; Dancy, 2010). Spirituality has been conceptualized as "a worldview in which individuals hold a more comprehensive understanding of self and hold belief in a larger reality than what is experienced in the natural world" (Dancy, 2010, p. 415). It is "the acceptance of or belief in the sacred force that resides in all things life" (Potts, 1991 as cited by Mattis, 1998, p. 105). A closely

related concept is religiosity, or ways be being religious. Religiosity is defined as “one’s intrinsic religious beliefs and religious practices” and is often framed as an aspect of spirituality (MacDonald, 2000 as cited by Berkel, Armstrong, & Cokley, 2004). Put differently, “religion is the structured way of how people practice spirituality” (Patton & McClure, p. 48). The ways participants in this study described their identity were more closely related to the concept of spirituality as defined by Dancy (2010). The salience of spirituality as well as the distinctions made between the concepts of spirituality and religiosity varied across participants. For Tatiana and Alysha, spirituality was a significant aspect of their identity, and was closely tied to their Christian beliefs and practices. Robin, Patrice, and Leila were more implicit in the ways they connected their spiritual sense of self with their academic and social experiences in college. Across all participants however, spirituality functioned as an internal source of strength, particularly during times of challenge.

*Spirituality and life choices.* Participants’ spiritual sense of self emerged in two dimensions. First, students’ spiritual sense of self surfaced as they described their life choices, personal and educational experiences, and expectations for the future. This was most evident when describing college choice decisions and rationale for choosing Penn over other options. Patrice, for example, cited the various factors that influenced her college decision, yet was ambiguous about her specific rationale for selecting Penn. As she described the choice, tilting her head to the side, she personified a sense that it was simply the right place for her to be. She shared:

I had visited this school in September of my last year of high school and after coming on the campus tour, I just loved it. I kind of *knew* at that moment that I would be here...that I *wanted* to be here.



Other than describing a sense of connectedness, Patrice was unable to articulate *why* she felt like the campus was “right” for her. Similarly, Robin, reflecting on the barriers that often preclude individuals from backgrounds such as hers from pursuing higher education, had trouble making sense of why she was granted the opportunity to attend such a prestigious college. Reflection on the ways that having this type of experience could shape her worldview, she shared:

It can go two ways, you can get this sort of elitist viewpoint about things, or you get this you know, ‘I’m here for a reason and hopefully I can figure out that reason and manifest it in positive ways especially back home in my community.

In contrast to these examples, Alysha, who grew up attending a Christian church, was more direct in expressing how she felt her spiritual sense of self guided her decision to enroll at Penn. Not only did she have the feeling that the campus was right for her thanks to the people she met during a campus visit, she found it to be no coincidence that she was reunited with these same individuals once she returned to campus as a student. She shared:

So when I got [to Penn as a freshman] I loved it. Me and my best friend now were in the same scavenger hunt group [during the initial campus visit]. We didn’t actually exchange numbers or anything, but when I came back for [the summer program] PENNCAP, she ended up being my roommate! That was God right there, I felt like.

These instances shared by participants highlight students’ belief that there is something or someone guiding their decisions that was beyond their own personal actions, suggesting a connection to and belief in a higher power (Patton & McClure, 2009; Stewart, 2009).

***Spirituality and coping.*** The second dimension through which participants’ spiritual identity emerged was as they discussed the ways they coped with challenging situations. As noted earlier participants in this study were not directly asked about their

spirituality, however they were asked about the ways they dealt with challenging situations or overcame barriers to persistence in college and these observations certainly pointed to their spiritual sense of self. This is evident by Tatiana, who identified as a Christian. Her observations reveal that her spiritual sense of self played a significant role in her ability to cope with the challenges of navigating her college experience. She shared:

It's still stressful, it's still a struggle, but I can manage it now because I feel more at peace. My relationship with God got a lot stronger because of being here [in college]. [Initially] I felt literally alone. My parents were there, you know, my friends were there, but deep down inside, I felt really alone. Like nobody really gets this! Like ya'll don't really understand what I'm going through! I found comfort in my Christianity. It was the only time I felt at peace and ok.

Previous research has found that spirituality serves as a means of support, coping, and resistance for African American students (Dancy, 2010; Patton & McClure, 2009; Stewart, 2008; Watt, 2003). Tatiana's reflection is consistent with these findings.

Researchers have found that spirituality can contribute to a number of positive outcomes including higher self-esteem, coping abilities, and positive identity development (Berkel, Armstrong, & Cokley, 2004; Dancy, 2010). Scholars suggest that the examination of spirituality and religion as it pertains to the educational experiences of African American students is presently understudied (Dancy, 2010; Jett, 2010; McClure & Patton, 2009).

The findings from the current study highlight the value of exploring students' spirituality in understanding their academic and social experiences. Taken together, previous research and the findings from the present study suggest spirituality is an important concept to explore if one is interested in understanding how African American students successfully navigate the educational pipeline.

### **Summary of Emergent Findings**

Participants' race, class, academic sense of self, gender, and spirituality, influenced not only the ways they individually engaged with the college environment, but also their perceptions of various members of the campus community and consequently the ways they engaged with the college environment. While some common patterns emerged given their shared identity as African Americans, women, and first generation college students, their upbringing, familial relationships, and interactions with others throughout their lives uniquely shaped each students' individual academic and social experiences. These findings illustrate the complexity of understanding the ways one's identity shapes the nature of student's academic and social experiences both prior to, and while attending college. With this context in mind, in the next section, I highlight students' perceptions of the academic environment and Penn, and the ways these perceptions influenced their academic experiences on campus.

## **How do Students Describe their Academic Experiences in College?**

The ways that students described their academic experiences attending Penn can be organized into four overlapping categories. The first category is **precollege academic experiences**, where students described the ways that their families and members of their school communities set up expectations for academic achievement that led to top academic performance through high school, and the development of a strong academic sense of self prior to entering college. Next is the **academic transition to college**, where students share that notwithstanding their previous history of academic success, they initially struggled academically as college students, and describe the strategies they used to adjust to the rigor of their coursework. In **classroom experiences**, students offer their impressions of the academic culture and climate within their college major, and share examples of positive and negative interactions with fellow students within the context of the classroom. The final category, **interactions with faculty and staff**, students provide examples of interactions with members of the campus community, and focus on the ways they initiated and engaged in various relationships to support their academic performance. Although each of these categories is presented separately, interaction between the various categories is apparent from the ways that students describe their academic experiences in college.

### **Precollege Academic Experiences: Expectations of Academic Achievement**

Each of the five students in this study described how their precollege academic experiences influenced their collegiate academic experiences. Specifically, students described having a firm educational foundation prior to entering college, as they maintained an impressive record of academic achievement from elementary school through high school. This helped students maintain confidence in their academic ability

once they began college. Participants attributed their early academic performance to their family's value of education, and the expectations for academic achievement maintained at home and at school. At home, parents set the expectations for academic achievement by establishing firm standards for grades and academic performance, by taking advantage of opportunities for their children to attend competitive schools and specialized academic programs, and through parental involvement in educational activities such as homework and school events. Within the school environment, either specific teachers or the overall academic culture encouraged and rewarded students' academic achievement through accolades, honors, and opportunities to engage in college preparatory activities. Taken together, these experiences shaped students' own attitudes about the value of education, reaffirmed their belief in their academic ability, and upheld the importance of engaging in positive academic behaviors. These experiences were central to how students made sense of their experiences once they began college.

**The Role of Parents.** Students highlighted several examples of the key role their parents played in establishing early expectations for academic achievement. All of the students in this study grew up in two-parent households. Within this environment, parents were able to work together as a family unit to establish and maintain high expectations for academic achievement throughout students' educational careers. Previous literature has shown that parents of first generation college students are not as informed of the college choice process, and consequently are less likely to stress strong academic performance as a way of getting to college (Choy, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Despite not having earned bachelors degrees, the parents of these first generation college students

were tremendously influential throughout students' precollege experience, emphasizing the importance of academic excellence as their gateway to college admissions and a better future.

The parents of each of the five participants in this study encouraged their children throughout early childhood, albeit in different ways. According to Cabrera and LaNasa (2000), parental encouragement has two dimensions. It is motivational, where parents maintain high expectations for their children, as in this instance, expecting students maintain high grades. Parental encouragement is also proactive, where parents become involved in school matters and discuss college plans (Perna, 2000). From these students' experiences, the ways that parents conveyed their expectations for academic achievement were both implicit and explicit in nature. At times, parents expressed their values implicitly, through their expectations for "good grades," or by supporting efforts that would keep students on the accelerated track, like permitting students' involvement in academic enrichment programs. Patrice, for example, shared her perspective on how, for the most part, her parents implicitly conveyed their values about education. Patrice is the eldest of five girls. She knows, based on how she was raised, that her parents place a high value on education, however, she had difficulty re-articulating the importance of education to them. She shared:

Well, I think that they believe, well they want us to go to school and college also, I don't know? But I know it's important to them. I know if I like dropped out of school they'd probably be very upset. They want us to go to school, get a good education, [and] get a job so that we can live better than they did.

As immigrants without any formal educational training of their own, Patrice feels that her parents had very limited knowledge about the educational system in America, yet they were influential nonetheless. As found in previous studies exploring the influences of

immigrant parents on the educational pathways of first and second generation American students, parents play an important role in promoting academic achievement (Baum & Flores, 2011; Nicholas, Stepkick, & Stepkick, 2008). The way Patrice's parents conveyed these expectations was by telling Patrice to earn "good grades." In high school, her grades kept her on the honors track, and with her parents' permission, she participated in an accelerated high school program that enabled her to graduate from high school in three years instead of four. Consistent with Griffin et al.'s (2012) study of the college choice process of Black immigrant students, these actions demonstrate that her parents indeed placed a high value on education and that they wanted her to get the best education possible, even if it meant Patrice being the first in the family to leave home. Leila also had trouble articulating her family's view on the importance of education, but she did recognize how some of the implicit actions of her mother helped to set a foundation for academic success from an early age.

My mother stayed home with us. She helped us with our homework. She never really explicitly said, "education was important and you need to graduate high school" and things like that. It was kind of implied by how much time she spent with us and doing educational things.

These "educational things" included enrolling Leila in an educational daycare program that provided her with the fundamental knowledge necessary to skip pre-kindergarten. Moreover, while her parents may not have directly told her that she was expected to maintain good grades and go to college, the standard was implied and even modeled by her older sisters' performance. Leila is the fourth child in the family to pursue higher education; her oldest two sisters graduated from selective universities. Leila maintained a strong academic record throughout her educational career, earning the honors of salutatorian in elementary school and valedictorian in high school. For her, going to

college was an “organic” process, and she knew she academically “fit the profile” of selective colleges and universities. Not only is academic achievement an expectation for the children in Leila’s household, so too is maintaining the academic record that would make them competitive for selective college admissions.

At other times, parents explicitly shared their expectations for academic achievement, and took a more active role in structuring opportunities for their children to gain the best academic footing possible. This was often achieved by deliberately selecting the schools and programs their children attended, and talking frequently about the importance of going to college. Having two parents in the home allowed for at least one adult to remain actively involved in the educational matters of their children. Each student shared instances where at least one of their parents took an active role in their education, typically by checking homework or attending school events. For Robin, both of her parents were highly involved in her educational activities throughout her experience. Each of her parents had some postsecondary experience (her mother was in the process of completing her bachelor’s degree at the time of this interview). Having this type of insider knowledge, in Robin’s opinion, motivated her parents to actively seek out the best opportunities possible for her and her younger brother. Robin described several of the actions each of her parents took to keep them on track academically, beginning at an early age and continuing through high school.

I’d say from the beginning we just got a really good foundation. We started off going to private schools. They were the type of parents that checked our homework; made sure they knew our teachers. [Attended] all the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) meetings, like all of that. They were heavily, heavily involved in our education, our success.



In Robin's experience, each of her parents took different roles in explicitly conveying the importance of education. While she described both of her parents as actively involved, her father was the more aggressive one in her opinion.

I would say that my dad was probably a little hard[er] on us than my mom. She was kind of the nurturer, the caregiver. She just had to make sure we had everything we wanted. But [my dad] was pretty heavily invested in our success. [He] bought us all the AP (Advanced Placement) books, all the SAT Prep books, all that kind of stuff. [He] encouraged us to do different programs. So I'd say [education] is really important in our family.

Gutman and McLoyd's (2000) study of poor African American families revealed that the parents of high achievers were more specific in their strategies to support education, and had more supportive conversations with their children about education and college going. This included parents frequently initiating contact with schools, establishing relationships with school officials, and being actively involved in the extracurricular experiences of their children. The actions of Robin's parents mirror this finding. Their actions were a clear demonstration of a commitment to obtaining the best educational opportunities for Robin, and led to her internalization of these values. She shared: "I definitely valued it though; it has definitely played a huge part in the way that I value my own education."

Whether implicit or explicit, over time participants described how they began to internalize expectations for academic achievement, and behave in ways that maximized their opportunities for success. These behaviors included taking their education "seriously," enrolling in the most advanced courses available at their school, and staying involved in extracurricular activities. Each participant had a long-standing history of academic achievement. Throughout elementary, middle and high school, they each defined themselves as "smart" or the "smart girl" in their school. In fact, three of the five participants were elementary school valedictorians, and three of the five participants were

high school valedictorians. Their family's expectations for academic performance translated to years of academic success, providing them with the academic profile necessary to be competitive in the college application process for the University of Pennsylvania. These experiences also gave them the initial foundation necessary for academic success on the collegiate level.

Overall, parents set expectations for academic achievement, but also provided the support necessary for students to focus on their educational endeavors. Tatiana, for example, grew up in a family that did not have a lot of financial resources, yet her parents were adamant that she not get a part-time job and instead, focus on her schoolwork.

Nope, school first; my family wouldn't even let me think about working. They were like, "You need to get your homework done. You come home. You do well." I was lucky that I had that. A lot of my friends *had* to work. My parents were like "No, we'll take care of the money part, you focus on the school part." So it really helped me like, you know, zone in...hone in on what I needed to do.

Growing up in two-parent households also provided students with what they described as "stable" home lives, affording them a reliable support system that they could tap into at different times in their lives. This was critical given that each student recognized that their home communities did not offer many examples of success, and oftentimes their classmates were not as focused on their own achievement like they were. These students' parents served as shields to protect them from the potential negative impact of family and neighborhood stressors (Charles et al., 2007; Johnson, 2010; Massey et al., 2006).

Tatiana, for example, grew up in a community that she described as "not the best of the best" and attended public schools in her home neighborhood. While she was focused on doing her best in school so that she could go to college, she acknowledged that her peers, particularly in middle and high school, were not as hopeful. When confronted with nay-

sayers or other potential barriers to her academic success, Tatiana was able to turn to her family for support and encouragement.

I'm very rare considering that my group of friends I went to school with, a lot of them didn't have a lot of big dreams or aspirations. It sounds really sad but it was true. [My hometown] is very much like a black hole where you're in there, and it's kinda hard to claw your way out. There are a lot of people that [can't] think past that environment. I got real lucky with the parents I got [who] saw beyond our environment. [I] think I've lived a very happy childhood. Everything I ever wanted I got. My childhood was beyond stable. So like those dreams and those aspirations were instilled in my brain early because my parents taught me you can really do what you want.

Massey et al. (2006) found evidence that exposure to neighborhood violence and disorder can potentially negatively undermine cognitive development and academic performance. Tatiana's description of her neighborhood as a place where it is "hard to claw your way out" and people did not think beyond that environment reminds us of the conditions that challenge many first generation students who grew up in racially segregated environments like this where issues of unemployment, poverty, drug abuse, and crime can be prevalent (Johnson, 2010). Similarly, Alysha shared her experience:

Out of all the African American kids in my circle, [I'd] say I had the most stable home life. We had our own issues with stuff as well, but, as far as having two parents there, as far as having parents at events, who really actually cared about what we were supposed to do, who were involved in my life, I was probably the only one who had that.

Participants were proud of the fact that their parents had been together their entire lives, and acknowledged how growing up in this type of home environment set them apart from some of their peers. These students were well aware of the influence this type of upbringing had on their academic success. These findings illustrate the potential influence of neighborhoods on the academic achievement of students (Charles, Dinwiddie & Massey, 2004). Charles, Dinwiddie, and Massey's (2004) study of students

attending selective colleges and universities found that African American students from segregated neighborhoods experienced higher levels of stress than other students, which negatively impacted their grades as well as their health. While students resided in neighborhoods where academic excellence and going to college were not the norm, they lived in households where going to college was the goal, and academic achievement was the way to get there.

Finally, parents as well as siblings served as a source of motivation for students' continued academic success. As first generation college students, each participant described their sense of responsibility to their families and home communities when it came to persisting in college. For Alysha, Robin, and Tatiana, all the eldest children in the household, this acute sense of responsibility was experienced from an early age, and motivated them to strive for success personally and academically for as long as they could remember. For Robin, earning her college degree would be a way to fulfill a life-long dream of her father.

My dad especially holds education as a top-notch value. [It's] big, big, big, priority for him. I think a lot of it stems from his own ideas and his own experiences of education having gone to a school like [selective university] and not finishing.

Tatiana shared how connecting to family as a source of motivation was particularly useful during times of challenge. She shared:

[My parents] have never been to a college graduation before so this will be their first college graduation. It will mean a lot to me because sometimes you do have that feeling of "I don't wanna finish this, I don't wanna do this" because it's really, really difficult. But I have two other siblings that I have to watch out for and I'm not, I'd be an awful example if I didn't finish and then my sister who's in [college] tried to drop, and my brother doesn't want to go.

Consistent with this study's conceptual framework, students' "input" characteristics, namely their family background, and influence of parents, had implications for the ways students experienced college (Astin, 1993). Although previous studies have shown that parents and families of first generation college students can often have a negative influence on student persistence (e.g. Engle et al., 2006; London, 1992), these stories provide evidence that parents and families also serve as an important source of support, encouragement, and motivation (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). This study's findings are consistent with other research that suggests that parents have a positive effect on African American children's educational achievement (Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Moreover parents overall were supportive of their children's decisions to go "away" for college, even though several of them were the first in the family to leave home (Turley, 2006).

**The Role of Schools.** Schools also played an important role in developing and maintaining expectations for achievement. These institutions structured opportunities for students to engage in rigorous coursework and exposed them to caring and competent teachers and staff members. This study's findings are consistent with other research that suggests that the type of schools students attend have implications for college enrollment and persistence (McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Walpole et al., 2005). With the exception of one, each participant in this study attended predominantly minority schools kindergarten through twelfth grade. When possible, parents deliberately enrolled their children in the best educational institutions available within their communities. Robin, for example described herself as a "guinea pig" and was moved from school to school in an attempt to maximize the academic options in her area. After the fourth

grade, Alysha applied to and attended an academically competitive middle/high school. Regardless of the institutional setting, well before the time each participant completed high school they had been identified as “high achievers,” and were afforded opportunities to take accelerated and honors courses in their respective schools. While the rigor of the schools they attended was uneven, they each recognized that they were exposed to the most rigorous courses available to them. All students had the opportunity to complete at least one Advanced Placement course, and some were able to take dual-enrollment courses at local colleges.

The staff members within these schools also played an important role in developing and maintaining expectations for academic achievement for these students. Specifically, teachers played a vital role in enhancing students’ academic skills and nurturing their love of learning. Students each shared examples of positive academic experiences with or facilitated by teachers. Patrice’s most memorable teacher was her kindergarten teacher, who helped her learn English and was remembered as being very kind and supportive. Patrice shared:

I adored my kindergarten teacher. She was really, really great. I still remember to this day when I found out that I was valedictorian in fifth grade. I went back to her and I told her. She said, “Wow! I remember when you came in here you hadn’t even spoken [English] and now you’re [valedictorian]!” So that was just one [memorable teacher], definitely.

While reflecting on her early academic experiences, Alysha recalled that the fourth grade was an important year because she began to realize her academic ability. Talking about her experiences in math, she shared:

Going over our times tables and things like that, we would play this game called “Around the World.” It was me and this Caucasian girl and we would just clean up the game. Like, nobody could beat us, and they were bringing down like fifth

and sixth graders, and we're still just beating the all! I'm thinking "I'm pretty good at math here, let's see where this goes."

Participants shared additional examples of how teachers used competition to spur interest in learning and confidence in their academic ability. For Patrice, interactions with her chemistry teacher in high school inspired her to pursue chemistry in college. Students with positive experience with math and science, as demonstrated by strong test scores or praise from teachers and parents, are more likely to continue to take higher level math and science courses during high school and pursue a math or science career in college (Brickhouse & Porter, 2001; Cobb, 2004; Hackett, et. al, 1999; Maple & Stage, 2001; Trusty, 2002). Patrice shared:

I had a really awesome chemistry [teacher], which is why I kind of became a chemistry major. He was very funny and he kept rewarding the people that excelled in class. I did very well in chemistry so that was very nice.

Sometimes, teachers challenged students in ways that forced them to work even harder to improve their skills. Tatiana shared such an experience:

He was my [eighth grade] English teacher and I remember him because he was the first teacher that gave me a failing grade [laughs]! He just pretty much told me that my writing was mediocre and that made me feel some type of way. But it was probably the best thing somebody ever told me. I needed that honesty. It made me step my game up. My grades got a lot better because of that.

Then in my senior year of high school, I found out that he was going to be my new English teacher and it was just an awful fact that I was like "No! I didn't want you anymore!" But honestly he did the same thing to me again. He was like "I'm going to be honest. This is mediocre. This is high school level writing. You need to be a college level writer." He made me kinda suck it up and I got the best grades out of my [graduating] class; I got the English award in my [graduating] class.

Tatiana worked with her teacher to improve her skills and feels that the hard work paid off. Teachers like these affirmed students' academic identity and at times pushed them

to maintain their “high achiever” status. These positive academic experiences contributed to students’ overall sense of being a “good student,” one who can do well in any academic setting.

For all participants, positive academic experiences with teachers were augmented by participation in college preparatory programs and other enrichment experiences. This included taking SAT preparatory courses, dual enrollment courses at local colleges, and attending summer programs designed to prepare students for the college application process. Moreover, school counselors provided key information about college and helped students structure their academic schedules in ways that would make them competitive in the application process (McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008). Alysha had to work to establish her relationship with her school counselor beginning in the seventh grade. In one of her initial meetings with Mrs. Walters, she shared that Penn was her number one college choice. At the time, she was not aware of Penn’s selectivity but it was clear that Mrs. Walters was. Talking about this meeting, she noted:

She’s like, “you want to go there?” She basically responded like I couldn’t get in. But, the relationship I have with my guidance counselor is really good. I think it’s more so she’ like, it’s an Ivy League school. I didn’t know what an Ivy League school was. So, I go to her, and I’m like ok, “so this is what I want to take before I graduate.” From that point on I just had a really good relationship with her.

Even as a high achieving student in her school, Alysha felt that she had to remain diligent when it came to working with her counselor to ensure that she could take the courses necessary to keep her competitive in the college application process. This included enrolling in the International Baccalaureate Program, taking upper-level math and science courses, and taking Advanced Placement courses. Alysha feel that *she* had to take the initiative when it came to structuring these opportunities. She described the process:



A lot of planning out and making sure my counselor took me serious. I know for a lot of Black kids they didn't [do that]...I'm like you to go there and make them know that you care. Because to them, you're just another student who's not going to make it. So, I was very determined about where I was going to go and what I had to do to get there.

Conversely, Tatiana's experience with her counselor was supportive from the beginning. She described the instrumental role that her counselor played in assisting her throughout the college choice process.

My favorite person probably out of like all of my experiences was Mr. Franklin who my college advisor. He came the end of my sophomore year. I look at this man and I'm like, "What is this little short White man from Connecticut gonna tell me about how to get to college?" I was like, "You don't live in this area. You don't necessarily know us. You don't know about my life. You can't tell me how I'm going to get to school." He definitely proved me wrong. He put his priorities on the back burner and put my priorities in front. And he really fought for me. For two years. Like fought for me like I was his kid. He groomed me and he kind of became my cover because my parents couldn't cover me and it wasn't because they didn't want to, they didn't know how to.

As demonstrated by previous research, counselors become important sources of assistance and information for students whose parents do not have direct experience with college (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Perna et al., 2008). Tatiana's experience illustrates how counselors can serve as more than simply a source of information, but as an active participant in the lives of students. As a first generation college student, Tatiana relied heavily on her college advisor to support her through the college choice process. Not only did he guide her through the process, he also personally escorted her to campus visits and helped her successfully obtain a full academic scholarship plus monetary stipend to attend the college of her choice. Without this support, it's clear that Tatiana questions how she would have been able to navigate the college choice process. Tatiana was lucky; she was matched with a

counselor who was deeply invested in her and was convinced of her academic potential. Her counselor never questioned her conviction to attend a selective university, and encouraged her to maintain the grades necessary to be competitive in the application process. These types of encounters with school professionals provided these first generation college students with the academic background needed, and the access to the information and resources necessary to establish themselves as high achievers. Participants acknowledged the benefits of these types of encounters in exposing them to the opportunities to attend a college like the University of Pennsylvania. They had confidence that as high achieving minority students, not only could gain access to the most selective universities in the country, but they could be academically successful once they got there.

Schools, teachers, and counselors played important roles in cultivating academic achievement for each of the first generation, African American college students in this study. Students were afforded several opportunities throughout their academic career to engage in advanced courses and to interact with teachers and counselors who were willing and able to invest their time and energy into their academic success. This speaks to the importance of having a multitude of resources to navigate the college process, especially for first generation college students. Hamrick and Stage (2004) caution:

In situations with limited if not scarce educational or personal resources to help students realize their parents' expectations for themselves, students and their families are left largely alone to deal with the difficult task of converting expectations and dreams into the kind of resilient motivation and goal-directedness that can overcome barriers to achievement. This same overreliance on individual motivation and resiliency, however, not only constricts the current pipeline from K-12 education to college for disadvantaged students, but could also be sources of pipeline leaks and failures (p. 165).

This sentiment speaks to the importance of continued collaboration between students, parents, and schools in order to maximizing opportunities for educational success for all students in general, but disadvantaged students in particular.

### **The Academic Transition to College: Unsteady Academic Beginnings**

Notwithstanding students' strong academic performance at the K-12 level, each participant described experiencing an unsteady academic transition to college, particularly during their first year. Students attributed their challenges in part to the differences between the levels of rigor experienced in their high school courses compared to the expectations in college. They realized that in order to perform at similar levels, they needed to adjust their academic behaviors including their study habits and strategies for time management in order to be successful. Participants also talked about their internal turmoil with acknowledging that they needed help academically and the struggle of deciding whether or not they should seek out campus academic resources or figure things out on their own.

**Academic Transitions.** For each student, the first two semesters of college was a period of adjustment to college in general, but specifically to the academic expectations of college. The transition from high school to college can be challenging for all students, and especially for students attending selective institutions of higher education where the educational standards and expectations for success are high (Astin, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Padilla et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993). Students attributed their initial adjustment challenges to several factors but the most cited factor was the perceived differences in the level of academic rigor in college compared to high school. Padilla et al. (1997) refers to this transition as a “discontinuity barrier” and in order for students to be successful academically they need to adjust to the new academic demands of the curriculum (Padilla

et al., 1997; Perna, 2005; Strayhorn, 2006; Terenzini et al, 1994). Patrice, Leila, and Alysha each shared specific examples of their recognition that achieving good grades in college required a different level of effort and different study habits than they were accustomed to:

I kind of was continuing what I did in high school, which was a complete disaster because high school was not so hard. I didn't have to study...if you didn't know how to study it was not a problem. So my first semester here was really, really tough. I would not study for exams until like the two or three days before the exam and so that, that didn't end well [laughter]. (Patrice)

I hardly ever studied because in high school things pretty much came naturally to me so I didn't have to study that much. I came to college and did the same thing and I failed my first exam in one of my classes. That was the wake-up call. (Leila)

[You] kind of start to realize you know, we're all smart so when you come here it's a little different and you're still smart but you have to work harder to kind of really earn your grades. A lot of us would probably went to schools where it wasn't as hard to do that. (Alysha)

In each of these examples students describe how information came “naturally” to them, and that they didn't have to put in much effort to earn good grades while in high school. But, there is also the realization that they would need to work differently or “work harder” in college if they wanted to be academically successful. Once students experienced these challenges, they began to engage in different behaviors to increase their chances of success.

**Adjusting Behaviors.** These precollege high achievers found it necessary to make adjustments to college life and the academic standards therein (Fries-Britt, 1998; Griffin, 2006). Initially, students began their process of adjustment by engaging in self-reflection. Reflection and positive self-talk helped students identify the source of their collegiate academic difficulties while reaffirming that they had the smarts to adapt to the

challenge of college level work. Reminding themselves of previously successful academic experiences motivated students to strive to do better. Patrice described her reflection experience:

Second semester I did a lot better because I went home during winter break and I was just like “This is awful. This is not me. I can do so much better than this.” And I tried to come up with a much better study schedule and I followed that throughout.

Moreover, students described the ways they would try to maintain a positive attitude and focus on their goals throughout their first year. As Tatiana shared: “I mean, college is hard. It’s really difficult. But I can’t imagine myself not finishing because it’s ingrained in my brain, I have to do this.” Similarly, Robin shared how she motivated herself to continue to strive for success by maintaining a positive attitude.

I never thought about actually failing. I never said to myself “what if I do actually fail?” That just kind of - it’s just a foreign thought for me. I never allowed failure to be a possibility. And because of that, it was, [yes] you’re smart. It’s [going to be] fine.

Attributing their less than expected early academic performance to the rigor, and not internalizing that they were incapable of rising to the challenges of Penn, was another strategy used. Robin describes how in her experience, most students felt that Penn was challenging academically:

That was the general consensus. It wasn’t just like, “oh my God this is so hard, like I’m stupid,” it was like, everybody, all 102 of us, sort of agreed it was tough [laughter].

Once this internal self-talk occurred, one of the next strategies students attempted was getting a better handle on their time management. Leila shared her perspective on the importance of time management.

I kind of got back on track. In terms of academics here, one thing is that you truly have to keep up with everything. Like at least fifty percent is just time

management. I mean, yes you do have to be smart and a fast learner and things like that [but] a great part of it is time management.

Another strategy used by students was to craft a schedule that would allow for a balance between challenging courses in their major with elective courses that were interested in taking. Charles et al. (2009) found that course selection has important implications for grades earned, because grading standards and grade distributions vary between programs and across departments. Tatiana shared her strategy:

I tried to give a good balance to my classes so those were my saving graces in terms of GPA. Not only did I love them but the teacher loved me and they were the highest grades I've gotten at Penn period. So I balanced a lot of my Wharton classes with those classes...I knew I wasn't going to do as well in.

Positive self-talk, utilizing time management strategies, and selective course taking all helped students adjust to the academic demands of college and led to improved academic performance in subsequent semesters.

**Finding Academic Support.** Students candidly described the academic difficulty they experienced in college. Tatiana, Patrice, and Leila each shared instances where they utilized the various academic resources on campus. Of the group, Tatiana was the most frequent user of these resources and she was most comfortable seeking help. She shared:

I really tried to utilize the tutoring center. My freshman year up to junior year I was definitely using the tutoring center. I don't know if it helped or not, but I was using it. I was [also] talking, trying to talk to professors, some worked better than others.

While these students did use campus academic resources, there was also a sense of hesitation about doing so. The hesitation stemmed from that fact that students were not accustomed to asking for help academically, given their success at the K-12 level where things came naturally to them. Alysha's experience typifies this sentiment:

I guess my one regret is not using all the tutoring services and stuff like that. I'm not one - I don't like to ask for help, I'd rather struggle to make it than ask for help. But [I'm] realizing [that] I needed help in certain things. I wish I would have used them more for those more troublesome classes.

Robin's reflection on her experience and the struggle with adjusting the academic rigor of college echoes the experiences shared by Alysha. She shared her perspective on her academic experiences through her first year in college:

It was a little tough. I think this happens to pretty much every high school student, especially at an elite university. You kind of go in like, "ah, yeah, I was top of my class, I'm so smart, I don't need a tutor," you know the real textbook definition of a good high school student who then goes on to a really tough college. I'd say that at first, like at the end of [my first] semester, I saw my grades, and I'm like "ah...didn't do so great."

And at first I tried to blame everyone but myself. I was like "oh, it's my high school's fault; they didn't prepare me for this." You know, "this teacher could have done XYZ...blah, blah, blah." And then, by the end of the next semester, I was like ok, this is all my fault, I just need to get this together. I need to not be full of pride. I was full of pride, you know, I kind of would get an assignment that I *knew* I did not understand, and I'd be like, "oh, I can figure this out, because I'm me. I got here, so I can figure it out."

As high achievers precollege, getting help was not something students were used to, and for a while, when it came to academics, they tried to "figure it out" on their own without the support of knowledgeable others on campus. Robin went on to describe her actions in an attempt to get back on track academically:

So I tried to tackle those things myself and I just needed help. I didn't go get it so the first year just didn't turn out the way I thought it would. It was tough, I'm not saying it was like, if I would have just got help I would have been fine, it was tough. Getting help probably would have made things a little better, but it was tough. It wasn't an easy first year.

The reluctance to seek out campus support is consistent with the study by Charles et al. (2009) of students attending selective colleges and universities which found that seeking

out institutional help overall is low. They also found that Black students were more likely to utilize on campus academic resources, in part due to the ways these students were targeted to participate in the services offered by their institutions. These findings suggest that the method of delivery for various academic supports should be crafted to reach these students before it is too late.

### **Classroom Experiences: Differences across Colleges**

As a selective institution of higher education, students anticipated that Penn would be academically rigorous and that their fellow students would be highly intelligent. Each participant had a distinct experience interacting with the academic spaces of campus depending upon their major. The academic spaces include the classrooms and various academic buildings on campus. Students described the academic spaces in terms of their perceptions of rigor, their interactions with faculty, and their interactions with peers. Robin described the School of Nursing as having a small and tight-knit community, yet she felt it was isolated from the other colleges. Leila shared that in her experience as a communication major in the School of Arts and Sciences, faculty did not foster engaging classroom environments, but she appreciated having the flexibility to select courses allowing her to focus and perform well academically. As a chemistry major in the School of Arts and Sciences, Patrice's experiences involved interactions with faculty and fellow students in laboratory settings and opportunities to work with/take classes with graduate students. Alysha and Tatiana were in the Wharton School, which was described as the most academically competitive environment on campus, even by those not in Wharton. To illustrate the distinctions between each college, each of these academic environments is described separately.



**School of Nursing.** The School of Nursing consists of approximately 550 undergraduate students (Fall, 2012). Robin described the School of Nursing as having a distinct campus environment that was small, close-knit, and at times isolated from other portions of the campus community. The school is physically located just beyond the boundaries of the main campus area. The only students who occupy that area of campus are nursing students and students attending the medical school at the university. Robin repeatedly emphasized this location:

The nursing school is technically not really on [campus] it's behind the quadrangle (quad)...the place where mostly freshman live...It's like another building right behind the quad and then the nursing school is behind that. So a lot of students on campus have no idea where the nursing school is.

Robin entered college with a class of 90 students along with about seven other African American students. Given the few numbers of Black students in the college, she feels that “knowing more than one or two nurses is just rare, it just doesn't happen.” On a positive note, the small environment lent itself to cultivating close relationships with her fellow nursing students.

The small environment also contributed to opportunities for Robin to informally get to know their professors. Robin shared: “the nursing school is especially good with that. It's because there are so few of us it makes it a lot easier for them to literally know us all by name.” Robin described the professors in the schools as being “top-notch” individuals who maintained an impressive research agenda. She has also been able to interact with her faculty advisor outside of class at the events sponsored by the department.

Robin's classroom experiences were shaped by the high academic standards of her professors as well as the emphasis on clinical practices in nursing. Several of her

core courses have been science related. Taken during her first year, Anatomy and Physiology has been her most challenging course to date. The professor was notorious for her academic standards, teaching first year students as if they were in graduate school.

Robin shared:

The teacher herself, she's kind of in her own world. It might be a rumor but I heard that the nursing board asked her to make her course material less rigorous because it was just too difficult - like on a graduate level. She didn't [laughs]. She seemed really nice you know, she smiled a lot. She was very helpful like if you needed her help she would give it to you. But she was the kind of teacher [where] you'd study all day, all night [and] get to the test and feel like you read the wrong chapter. When it was finally over it was like the shackles fell off [laughs]!

In laboratory settings Robin felt a bit more comfortable because she was able to engage with the material personally through the practice of animal dissection and other clinical techniques. Robin also described the rigidity of the nursing curriculum sequence. The schedule allowed for little room to take elective courses and core courses are rarely offered during the summer term. As a result of this rigidity, Robin described the pressures associated with doing well enough academically as not to fall off of the sequence for the major. Failing to keep up with the courses as scheduled would lead to a postponed graduation date. Now in her junior year, Robin has moved into the clinically based courses that limits the time she has available for social activities or for engaging with students who are not in her major. She shared:

Junior year it gets pretty difficult for us. You've got long hours [and] lots of assignments, so we just aren't out as much. So it's not common for you to meet someone like that's in the nursing school. So we're sort of secluded, off to the side.

As Robin continues to engage in her upper-level nursing courses, she has begun seriously thinking about which specialty she would like to pursue upon graduation.

**School of Arts and Sciences.** The School of Arts and Sciences, referred to as “the College,” has approximately 6,000 students in its various academic programs (Fall, 2012). Leila and Patrice are students in the College. Leila, who studies communication, appreciates the flexibility of the major to allow her to structure her courses in ways that maximize balance. When describing her academic experiences as a student in the College, she spoke of the professors and the structure of the courses. She feels that the lecture courses are often taught in ways that inhibits, and to some extent discourages critical discussion and engagement. Consequently, she prefers the lecture format, so that she can absorb the information at her own pace and “[be]cause I can still gather the information and not be required to talk.” This comes from her experience in lectures where professors were not as open to hearing from students. She described an example from one of her seminars where there was very little opportunity for discussion:

I took one Africana Studies class because it is cross-listed with communication. I told them I’m not going to take an Africana Studies class again because I just didn’t like [it]. I mean it was all about the Black experience in America and most of the people in this class happened to be Black. I felt like most of us related to the content. The professor was White, which I mean that’s fine; you don’t have to be Black to understand the Black experience. But I don’t like it when there’s like [no discussion]...I mean how can you talk about the Black experience in a class full of Black people and not get their input?

Leila’s experience in her Africana course mirrors findings from Padilla et al. (1997) and the “lack of presence” barrier associated with the absence of minorities in the curriculum and experiencing an institutional culture that “marginalized, devalued, and omitted ethnic minority students” (p. 131). This early experience prompted Leila to disengage from these types of courses in subsequent semesters.

As a chemistry student, Patrice described her academic experiences in relation to her science courses and laboratory experiences. Once Patrice began college, she

immediately noticed the differences between her academic preparation in math and science and the expectations of her college courses. She completed pre-calculus and chemistry in high school in anticipation of her college load, but felt that the chemistry course was “too basic to compare to the level at Penn.” She shared:

The most challenging courses [were] chemistry and calculus. I didn't have any calculus in high school but I found that the calculus here wasn't very bad. I understood most of the time and I did fine. Chemistry was [bad]. I was enrolled in regular CHEM 101 (General Chemistry I) but I was so confused. I had no clue what was going on.

Patrice felt underprepared for her college chemistry class, even though she had taken chemistry in high school. One of the most significant factors related to decisions to persist in science majors is students' ability to succeed in “gateway courses” such as introductory chemistry during their freshman year (Seymour & Hewitt, 1997). As precollege academic achievement is strongly linked to early academic success, Patrice's experience demonstrates that even high achieving students who were on the “science track” in high school may experience challenges adjusting to the academic rigor of the college curriculum (Perna, 2005). By connecting with her faculty early, Patrice was able to modify her schedule to be placed in the appropriate level courses. She went on to explain the situation:

I went to the CHEM department and they enrolled me in a special introductory course which was a little better because the professor assumed very little, minimal knowledge for the class. That [also] helped me to connect to a professor here because I was the only undergraduate in that class...he and I sort of got to know each other a little better...and I also continued with him to take CHEM 102 (General Chemistry II) so that was nice.

Contrary to the literature about how women in sciences may experience a chilly classroom environment, Patrice felt quite comfortable in her courses, especially after she moved into courses primarily made up of students in her major (Lewis, 2003; Seymour &

Hewitt, 1997). She shared: “we’re all always together because all of our classes are all major classes. We’ve all kind of formed a very solid friendship.”

Once she became a McNair Scholar, a federally funded program designed to increase the numbers of traditionally underrepresented groups pursuing Ph.Ds., Patrice was encouraged to find a faculty mentor to work with for research in chemistry. These opportunities to work with faculty members in her field gave her experience with the techniques in the field and fostered her interest in pursuing academic science as a career (Astin, 1993; Seymour & Hewitt, 1997; Tinto, 1993). She shared, “because the summer [research experience] went well, I was thinking, ‘I can do this. I can do research.’” At times, however, it became difficult to fulfill her responsibilities in the lab while managing her academic load and work-study responsibilities.

I was basically doing nothing outside of lab, school, and work. So yeah, I was very disappointed. My grades were disappointing. I was not happy at all with them. After that semester, I decided for spring that I would sort of take a break...I’m pretty sure just working in the lab sent me into a depression and stuff like that. It was not good.

As Patrice continues in her major and begins making her plans for after graduation, she had been able to find balance between her academic responsibilities and work responsibilities by modifying her work schedule and connecting often with her McNair advisor who has provided her with support and advice.

**Wharton School.** Approximately 1800 undergraduate students are enrolled at the Wharton School of Business (Fall, 2012). Students who took classes in Wharton repeatedly described the environment as “competitive,” which made it that much more difficult to excel. One of the policies that contributed to this sense of competitiveness was the grading system. Within Wharton only a specific percentage of students in any

given class can earn an A. Alysha, a junior in Wharton, feels that this policy may contribute to increased competition amongst students for grades within the classroom.

Alysha described policy:

Wharton is made in a way where you're not allowed to give out more [than] 30 percent of As. Like 30 percent regardless are going to get Cs. It doesn't matter if you got an A like everybody else, if you A is not like somebody else's A, you get a C.

In the classroom, students described the need to prove themselves academically to their peers and described the behaviors they engaged in to demonstrate to their professors and others that they were serious about their education. This need to prove oneself was particularly problematic for group work activities and became a source of stress for students (Jackson, 1998). Tatiana described at length how the academic press within Wharton was different from her own academic focus, and how she initially did not feel that she had the level of academic support necessary to be successful in college.

I didn't feel like there was support there. I felt like within my peers I didn't understand them because they were a different type of movement than I was. I was a very driven kid but I wasn't competitive. They're both. A little more abrasive than I'm used to.

Consistent with Tatiana's experiences, the academic environment at Wharton was repeatedly described as a place where students had to "fend for themselves" and there "wasn't a lot of support." Tatiana described needing to be the one to initiate academic support within the classroom setting (Davis et al, 2004). She was very open about the impact this environment on her self-esteem and academic sense of self:

Wharton is very GPA driven; it can really lower self-esteem honestly and it's that type of environment. It's a make it or break it environment. I don't think they mean to do it, but I wish they knew that it breaks a lot of kids' hearts. A lot of kids' hearts, and a lot of kids' souls. It's hard. I don't think they really

understood that this might instantly crush them. It totally crushed me my first couple of years.

Tatiana's experience highlights the negative influence of exposure to academic environments that are isolating or chilly have on students. Allan (2006) found that women in male dominated majors (e.g. engineering and accounting) were more likely to experience a "chilly" academic environment compared to students in female dominated majors (e.g. nursing and education) due to professors' reliance on gendered teaching approaches that favored competition over collaboration. Cabrera and associates (2002) found that exposure to collaborative practices not only benefit minority students such as those in this study, but have added value to the educational experiences of all students in the academic setting. The findings from their study support the notion that collaborative learning practices "harness the ability and motivation of students towards their personal development, understanding of science and technology, appreciation for art, analytic skills gain, and openness to diversity" (Cabrera et al., 2002 p. 29). Within competitive academic environment in Wharton, students shared how they were less likely to engage with peers (who were not already their friends) for assignments, in part because their grade was tied to the performance of the class, and also because interactions across race were at some times awkward. This became a barrier for students to cultivate diverse collaborative groups with others. Tatiana shared how overall it was an uncomfortable experience trying to find other students to work with, especially non-African American students. She shared:

I'm very chill (calm). If you need help, I'm [going to] help you. There's times where I've asked people for help and they flat out told me no... It's really uncomfortable. It's happened to me a couple of times. So I try to be in classes where I know the people...in all honesty it is very awkward being the only Black student when you have to form groups for a project and you don't know anybody.

To offset these negative experiences, Tatiana and Alysha engaged in several strategies to adapt to and thrive within the Wharton environment. Tatiana described how some of her fellow Wharton students attempt to “block” their schedules by arranging so that several African Americans were taking courses together at the same. Alysha talked about working with peers who were not necessarily “friends” but would be good supports in the classroom. Outside of Wharton, they each sought out elective courses in the College as a way of balance out their academic load and be “happy.” Alysha shared:

Wharton kids, like when they’re in the College class, you can like tell who they are, because they are just so happy to be there. I took Italian, and I was just so happy! [speaks in Italian]

At some point during their Penn career both Alysha and Tatiana questioned their decisions to pursue a major in Wharton. They shared their sense of frustration with their academic experiences, and Alysha at one point considered changing her major so that she could have a better GPA. She explained her rationale for this:

There were plenty of times when I considered switching to the College - not to downgrade them that way. With that being said there is a difference between what you can do in Wharton and what you can do in the College. In Wharton it’s like you can do A level work just like anybody else, but if like your A isn’t like the other persons’ A, you’re going to get a C. To this day I’m so pissed off on the C+ I have [in a class].

With time, Alysha has learned to modify her approach to taking courses in Wharton and is now considering a minor in Spanish in order to improve her GPA in hopes of graduating with honors. Tatiana, who was recently inducted into an Honor Society, has secured her “ideal” job with a reputable marketing company and is set to begin after graduation.

### **Interactions with Faculty and Staff: Role Modeling versus Nurturing**



In general, students' interactions with faculty occurred as structured interactions with course professors, advisors, or supervisors. In this sense, faculty members served as professional role models or experts in the field who exposed students to teaching practices, ways of conducting research, or professional examples in their perspective career fields. When faculty took an active role in their education, students took it as an affirmation of their ability to do well academically and professionally in that particular area. Interactions with staff members were also structured in nature, but overtime staff members and participants developed meaningful long-term campus relationships. When speaking about these individuals, there was more of a nurturing tone. Staff members shared strategies for academic success, checked in frequently on students, and forwarded them information about academic resources. Staff members became regular fixtures in the lives of these students and served as the foundation of their on-campus support system.

**Faculty Interactions.** Student-faculty interactions began within the classroom. Each student had early experience in large classes, typically in introductory science courses that were taught primarily in lecture format. Consequently, opportunities for in-depth interactions with faculty were minimal, and relegated to faculty's posted office hours. Research indicates that faculty-student relationships affect student satisfaction with college (Astin, 1993). Nettles (1991) concluded that Black students attending PWIs had less contact with faculty outside of the classroom, and were less academically integrated into campus life as compared to their White peers. Consistent with his finding, Leila, Alysha, and Robin were able to recount very few specific professors with whom that had had substantial interactions with, outside of their supervisors and student

organization advisors. From their experiences, they were not interested enough in the work that the faculty in their majors were doing to initiate contact with their course professors. Moreover, they talked about having to “make an effort” to go and see them, or that they simply haven’t found the time to meet with them individually. Even Robin, who described the professors in the School of Nursing as caring, recognized that it was challenging to cultivate relationships with faculty in her department due to the demands of faculty members’ research agenda and clinical practice. The few faculty members students did connect with however became their supervisors as they worked with them on short-term research projects. Leila, Tatiana, and Alysha each were able to secure research projects with professors in their major, which helped them gain a better understanding and appreciation for research in their respective fields (Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1980). As a McNair Scholar, Patrice was required to cultivate a relationship with a faculty mentor who would train her in chemistry research methods, but she felt that it didn’t extend far beyond the advisor/student dynamic. She shared:

Professor wise, my mentor for research, he’s ok. I think he’s just kind of distant by nature. He’s not sort of the person that I would go to. But I know if I needed advice on grad school or if I needed a letter of recommendation I could go to him.

Tatiana described a close relationship forged with her East Asian studies professor who was like a “grandmother” to her would go out of her way to show that she encouraged her students.

I think I’m usually the only Black person in my class because I’m a Japanese Studies minor. Those times are fine because my teacher’s White. She loves me. God, she loves me. It’s nice to feel like special in the class because she’s always writing [on my assignments], “enjoyed this!” That’s an ally.

While each student talked about the potential importance of getting to know professors, they generally seemed disinterested in doing so at this point in their academic careers.

Leila described the potential impact this lack of interactions has on the academic environment on campus.

I do think [Penn's] professor-student interactions needs to be improved but that really does rely heavily on the student...I would have to say more than half of the students here feel like [they're] just coasting through the classes, just getting credit...they're not really progressing in the field because their professors aren't stressing it.

Informal student-faculty contact can contribute to positive educational outcomes for students of color (Pascarella, 1980). Informal interactions move beyond the “transition of facts and knowledge” as described by Leila, and can contribute to certainty about career choice, facilitate student educational aspirations, and contribute to an overall satisfaction with college (Pascarella, 1980, p. 545). The findings from this study elucidate the limited interactions students have with their faculty, even as upper-class students. Not having a diverse faculty may have contributed to the availability of opportunities to engage and connect their faculty members as they matriculated through coursework. Participants had few opportunities to take classes taught by African American faculty members, and were more likely to talk favorably about courses taught by women than men. To date, students had not experienced extensive interactions with faculty outside of the classroom setting.

**Staff Interactions.** Participants described the meaningful relationships they were able to cultivate with various staff members on campus. Many of these relationships began through students' participation in programs on campus, most notably the Pennsylvania College Achievement Program (PENNCAP), the Pre-Freshman Program (PFP), and the Ronald B. McNair Baccalaureate Scholars Program (McNair). When speaking about these staff members there was a clear tone of nurturing. The nurturing relationships described between students and staff was akin to mentoring relationships

(Freeman, 1999). These were individuals with whom students could express and share their accomplishments as well as uncertainties about the future, and walk away from these interactions with a better sense of direction. These were also individuals with whom students could trust. Leila described her relationship with her academic counselor from PENNCAP. Although she is only required to meet with her once a semester, they typically meet two or three times a semester “as needed.” Leila shared: “I feel very comfortable talking with her about things that aren’t related to academics just because she respects confidentiality and she’s not judgmental.” Moreover, Tatiana described how the PENNCAP staff members in general, and the office environment gave her the sense of support she felt was missing in the Wharton School. Moreover, it was a place where she could turn to for support when she couldn’t reach out to her family. She shared, “they have been my rocks. My parents have always been there [but] when I couldn’t get in touch with my parents, PFP was that place. It’s a great group of people; a lot of resources.”

Patrice, who was not a PFP student, described the close relationship she has with the staff in the McNair program and how they have help guide her through her time at Penn. Her staff mentors in the program exposed her to new opportunities through research experiences off campus and participation in local and regional conferences. For her, the McNair staff members were an extension of her family. She shared:

I think that the two people here at Penn that I am sort of the closest to are the directors of the McNair program. They are so very, very helpful and they care about us so much. And they’re sort of like my parents here. You can go to them with anything.

Students shared other examples of how staff members were able to connect them to various academic, financial, and professional resources throughout their college

experience. These staff members shared strategies for academic success, checked in frequently on them, and forward them information about academic resources. Staff members became regular fixtures in the experiences of these students, who became the foundation of their academic on-campus support system. These findings reflect previous research of how participation in campus support programs can positively assist students in adjusting to college (Astin, 1993; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2009; Freeman, 1999; Padilla et al., 1997).

### **Summary of Academic Experiences**

The findings reveal that students' academic experiences in college were shaped by their precollege experiences at home and at school, the rigorous academic expectations for their major, and their interactions with faculty and staff on campus. These students entered college as high achievers and as a result were confident in their ability to succeed academically, even when they experienced challenges adjusting to the rigor of their curriculum. These findings emphasize the importance of understanding students' precollege academic experiences when considering their transition to college and subsequent experiences upon arrival. Moreover, given the differences in students' experiences across major, the findings suggest that students' academic discipline and the expectations therein shape their level of academic integration into to college life, as well as the time and energy they can dedicate to exploring the social resources on campus. In the next section, I highlight students' social experiences at Penn, and opportunities to engage with diverse others within the campus community.

## **How do Students Describe their Social Experiences in College?**

The ways that students describe their social experiences attending Penn can be organized into three overlapping categories. I begin with their **precollege social experience**, where students share their relationships with peers within their elementary and high school experiences prior to college, and how these early expectations shaped their expectations for social engagement on the college level. Participants then described their early opportunities to engage socially with other potential Penn students through scheduled visits to campus and attendance at summer bridge programs. These experiences helped gain a sense of the campus community at Penn, and positively influenced their decision to attend Penn. Next, is **campus engagement**, where students described their perceptions of the diversity of organizations on campus and their rationale for selecting specific organizations to join. Students shared that they were able to find “like-type” communities on campus through their interactions with individuals who shared similar interests and values. These relationships were cultivated through informal interactions with peers, living in the African American themed dormitory, and through membership in organizations that reflected their personal interests, professional aspirations, and/or cultural background. Finally, students described the campus social environment in comparison to their **home communities**, highlighting the perceived differences in the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic background between themselves and other members of the campus community. Students shared how at times the campus environment fell short from meeting their expectations in terms of inclusion and diversity. Sometimes Penn felt like a completely “different world” from the one in which

they were raised. Findings suggest that students entered college open to opportunities to engage with diverse peers, and over time, began to forge relationships with peers who shared similar interests and goals as them, across racial groups, academic majors, gender, and socioeconomic status. With these new interactions, students became more aware of the differences between themselves and the members of the campus community, and attempted to make sense of these differences in terms of their relationships with individuals from home.

### **Precollege Social Experiences**

To provide a context for the social experiences of the participants in this study as students at Penn, they first described their precollege social experiences as students in middle and high school. Many of these relationships with peers were shaped by their social identities as high achievers, African Americans, and women. They described the diversity (or lack there-of) of their friendship groups, and how these early interactions with peers shaped their intentions to engage in the social life of campus as college students.

As participants began engaging in the college choice process, they took advantage of opportunities to meet other potential Penn students from diverse backgrounds, to interact with upper-class students, and to gain a better sense of the availability of social organizations and activities on campus through campus visits. These opportunities to engage in the social campus environment were facilitated by the Office of Admissions' annual Multicultural Scholars Preview Day and participation in a summer bridge program called the "Pre-Freshman Program" or PFP. Students described how attending these precollege events afforded them with not only the opportunity to explore the campus, but

to meet other African American and minority students who would eventually become long-term friends.

**Precollege Peer Interactions.** Each participant in this study had differing interactions with peers prior to entering college. As described previously, Alysha and Tatiana experienced social isolation and alienation from their African American peers through middle and high school, attributing these experiences to their identity as high achieving African American women (see Fries-Britt, 1998). Alysha attended a predominantly White middle and high school, and given her experiences of isolation from the Black community in her school, she described how she was really excited to meet and engage with African American students in college, and specifically looked for these opportunities as she navigated her college search process. Conversely, Tatiana, who attended a predominantly minority high school, was actually excited to go to college for the chance to meet and engage with White students for the first time. Tatiana explained further:

I came here kinda excited to meet White people. The only two experiences I had with White people, they were both really great experiences...So I'm like "Oh, this is gonna be great! I'm gonna meet White people...I'm gonna have White friends." That wasn't the case when I got here...Outside [of my White bestfriend] and maybe 3, 4 other people I have almost no White friends which was weird to me because I used to get made fun of for you know "talking White" or "acting White"...so I thought you know, if anyone would understand that it would be White people but then it turned into minor things that were big to me but big in terms of our [negative] interaction.

While Alysha and Tatiana's experiences were at the extremes, Robin, Patrice, and Leila talked about being able to maintain close friendship groups throughout high school based upon their personal interests. Leila described maintaining a very social interaction with her peers through high school, who were mostly minority students, she shared:



Most of my friends were the ones who were like in the math club [and] things like that, and then when I came to high school I had a lot of the same friends. That's one thing I would say would be kinda unique about my experience. I know some students here who kinda felt like they were in the nerd group but they were kinda ostracized or they felt like they were picked on. I was really social with my friends.

Leila was looking to continue these types of social connections with peers upon entering college. Similarly, Robin talked about having a close group of peers with whom she spent a lot of time with in high school, but given that she was looking to attend college away from home, she was open to expanding her network and meeting new people. These individual interactions with peers shaped some of the decisions students made about getting involved with various communities on campus and participating in various campus activities and programs as college students. Although each participant identified as African American women, they were initially interested in engaging in different types of communities once they arrived on campus. Their first exposure to the diversity of communities and programs at Penn was through their experience attending the annual recruitment event for newly admitted students, the Multicultural Scholars Preview Program.

**Multicultural Scholars Preview Program.** Each of the five students in this study took advantage of the opportunity to attend the Multicultural Scholars Preview event, held in April of their senior year in high school. Later renamed the “Scholars Preview Program,” this event includes a performing arts talent show, an academic information session at each School, and a dinner and reception with the Dean of Admissions. The “program is targeted toward students demonstrating different types of diversity — cultural, geographic, academic, and socioeconomic” (Furda, 2012). The program aims to demonstrate to potential students from traditionally underrepresented

groups (e.g. racial/ethnic minorities, lower-income students, students from outside the Mid-Atlantic Region) that they could potentially find multiple communities with whom they could connect with if they were to matriculate to Penn. The stated program goals are consistent with the literature regarding the importance of demonstrating the diversity of experiences students can avail themselves upon entering college, which can be especially important for African American and first generation college students (Astin, 1993; Haussman et al., 2007; Padilla et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993).

Students described the lasting impact attending the Scholars Preview Program had on their sense that Penn was the *right* place for them to attend. As high achieving African American women, attending the Scholars Preview Program was one of their first opportunities to engage with a diverse group of high achieving African American students. For Alysha, this experience really helped her to envision herself as a part of the campus community. For students like Alysha who had difficulty maintaining same race peer groups with similar interests in middle and high school, going to Penn was her first opportunity to move beyond just being perceived as the “smart Black girl,” and get to know others for the variety of interests that they hold. Exposure to the various campus activities highlighted during the Scholars Preview Program also made students aware of the myriad of programs that they could get involved in (Tinto, 1993; Padilla et al., 1997). Leila also talked about the various individuals she was able to meet and connect with during the weekend; individuals that she was excited to reconnect with as a student. She shared:

It was fun. I met a few girls from New York who like to party [giggle]. It was just a really great. We met all different [groups]...like the Latin dance group, the dance group, the poetry club. It was just like all around. It was nothing

academic. It was just like all of the multicultural social activities that happen at Penn.

From their experiences attending the Scholars Preview Program, participants expressed a sense of excitement about returning to campus as a student in the Fall. In order to get a jumpstart on their college career, some decided to engage in an additional bridge program, the Pre-Freshman Program.

**PFP: Pre-Freshman Program.** Four of the five participants were aware of, and took advantage of the opportunity to participate in “PFP. This program targets first generation college students, such as those in this study, to participate in a four-week summer bridge program designed to prepare them for the academic and social life of campus. Participating in these “learning communities” allowed students to not only make new friendships, but it also helped them to “bridge the academic-social divide that typically plagues student life” (Tinto, 1997, p. 611). These relationships with peers evolved into supportive networks that students could interact with both inside and outside of the classroom (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1997). The courses students took through PFP mirrored their first semester schedule depending on their major, and were taught by university professors. By the end of the experience students had an enhanced perspective of the academic expectations for college, but when talking about their experiences in the program, they spoke in greater detail about the influential role that upper-class students had on their perception of the campus, about the friends that they made, and about the connections they established with the program staff. Robin described the impact of her early interactions with upper-class students as well as graduate students during her time in PFP:

I got to spend a lot of time with people who were already students here. Both graduate students and [undergraduates] when I did PENNCAP. That was a lot of fun because usually they were like really top-notch kinds of students. They are super fun.

Students also talked at length about the support and encouragement they received through their relationships with the student and professional staff in PFP. Students were encouraged to continue these relationships with the professional staff members throughout their college career, and had at least two scheduled meetings with them each academic year. Alysha shared her relationship with her PFP counselor, which has continued into her junior year.

They've always like been a part of my life in some way shape or form. They always have workshops, field trips, and my peer advisor...she's just like a mom. She's a mom during the program, she's a mom afterwards. She always likes to check on us at least once each semester; find out what our goals [are]. Every time I go to her I'm like "Yeah everything's fine" but she looks at my grades, she's like "Alysha, you know you can do better..." She's always there if I need someone to talk to...she's like the mom away from home.

Early exposure to the college campus allows for students to gain an initial impression of the academic and social environment of an institution and allows them to visualize whether or not they will "fit" within these environments (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Haussman et al., 2007). Opportunities to attend bridge programs like PFP address what Padilla et al. (1997) refer to as the "lack of nurturing barrier" to college persistence, or the absence of supportive resources on campus needed to facilitate the adjustment and development of (minority) students (Astin, 1993; Engle et al., 2006). As illustrated by students' experiences, PFP fostered a small campus community where students were able to get to know one another, begin to prepare academically for college, and gain a better sense of campus prior to the entire student body arriving in September. Participation in PFP helped these first generation college students expand both their academic and student

networks as well as social resources on campus (Berger, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Engle et al., 2006; Strayhorn, 2011). Alysha's reflection captures this essence:

One thing that I loved about PENNCAP, and I know it's not exactly [like] the real world, is that it's a support team. All the Black people know each other. Yes, there's a little drama, but at the end of the day, I can honestly say that we are all cool with each other.

### **Campus Engagement**

The ways participants described their social engagement on campus was framed within their experiences as members of different campus communities. This was through their individualized interactions with peers on campus, as residents in the African American themed College House, and through their participation in student clubs and organizations. They began by sharing their overall perception of the campus social environment, and provided examples of the ways they engaged with various members of the campus community.

**Campus Environment.** The words used by more than one participant to describe the social spaces on campus were "resourceful" and "diverse." Each participant highlighted the diversity of the campus environment, particularly in terms of opportunities for involvement in social and pre-professional activities and engaging with like-type peers. As members of the campus community, students had several resources readily available to them, whether they chose to engage in them or not. This included the various social and academic resources and programs and access to the Penn Alumni network of people in various positions across the globe. Leila's description of the social spaces on campus captures this sentiment:

I would say the school is very resourceful. You can get involved in anything. The poetry club, dance; if you want to get involved with something here you can.

I'm a public speaking advisor and coming in I would have never thought that would be something that I'm interested in.

Students spoke about the ways that Penn would make students aware of these resources early on. Additionally, Robin talked about the diversity of these resources and shared her sense that there was something for everyone. She commented:

I was first kind of impressed with the diversity [on campus]...they catered a lot to freshmen. They wanted to make sure that we were getting out there and we were involved. I was appreciative of that because like I'm sure Penn put some thought into the type of people they were bringing in so there wasn't a lot of like exclusivity. It was a lot of "Let's all get together. Let's all go. Let's all," especially as freshmen. It's change a little as we've gotten older and kind of found our niche or whatever. They made it very clear that there's a lot of resources.

Taken together, participants found the campus environment to be one that was diverse, inclusive, and full of resources that they could tap into socially, and well as academically and professionally. These perceptions may reflect previous policies enacted by campuses nationwide designed to diversify campuses in order to recruit and retain students of color (Bowen, et al., 2005; Hurtado, 1992; Pike & Kuh, 2006). Another resource that was prevalent on campus was their peers, and thus participants talked at length about their informal and formal interactions with peers.

**Interactions with Peers.** Consistent with previous studies concerning the social experiences of African American students attending predominantly White institutions (Bergerson, 2007; Charles et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2004; Murguia et al., 1991; Walpole, 2003), each participant noted the challenges of finding meaningful connections with members of the campus community during their first semester in college. While they were able to meet and interact with some students prior to beginning college through the Multicultural Scholars Preview Program and PFP, their schedules made it difficult to

continue some of those connections once classes began. Outside of formalized campus groups, interactions with peers occurred in a number of ways – through having classes together, living in the same building, or through working together.

Some of the early interactions with peers students described were their interactions with upper-class students on campus. Engaging with these knowledgeable others provided students with information about how to navigate the social and academic spaces on campus (Padilla et al., 1997). Alysha spoke about her opportunities to engage with upper-class students, and the impact it had on her experience:

[Joining the dance company] was life changing because of my friend Jessica. She's Latina and she and I got really, really close. She was a senior so it was really sad when she graduated. But, having her as a support system, like, we went through a lot last year...I'm mad she's gone but, she's one of my closest friends.

These individuals became close friends and to date remain important alumni connections after they graduated through continued communication through phone calls, text messages, or social media (e.g. Twitter and Facebook). As a senior, Tatiana acknowledged that many of her good friends have graduated. She shared:

I have a lot of alumni support. I think some of my closest friends are alumni. I have 2010 friends, 2011 friends, 2012 friends and we're a really cool group. The fact that they're in different states doing different things - we still correspond very frequently, you know, through text, Twitter, and Facebook all the time. So those are my actual legitimate friends. I feel like they're great.

When students specifically referenced the Black community on campus, they talked about their perceptions of the diversity within the community and how unified it was across campus. Within this community, students were able to find meaningful connections with others not simply because of their race, but also through connections due to their ethnicity, gender, or personal and professional interests. Robin and Alysha talked at length about their opportunities to engage with member of the Black community

at Penn. Robin, for example was drawn to other students with similar interests and family values. She described how it was fairly easy for her to find a group of individuals to connect with:

It's just like a niche of fun, pretty, Black girls. We just all kinda hang out. We're all really close. We go to all of the parties together, we study together. It just kinda happened naturally like with the same interests and the same background and the same kind of viewpoint on life. Certain people just kind of flock together.

As important as racial connections were to students, the feeling that students were able to connect with other students in meaningful ways was also important. Tatiana, Patrice, and Leila each talked about maintaining a diverse group of friends who they were able to connect with based upon shared interests and values. Leila recognized that while her friends are minority students, she has very few Africa American friends. She described how this may potentially differentiate her experiences from other students:

I don't know if [engaging with the Black community] would have made my transition better...I never really felt like the odd one out like when I was the only Black person in a group. But there are other people who might feel that way.

Not being able to maintain social connections with peers potentially have a negative impact on students' social and academic experiences, as well as their overall sense of belonging. This was Leila's experience after her freshman year. She shared:

Freshman year I had that really [academically] solid semester, second semester ...after my friends had all joined sororities I was very lonely. It was such a hard transition to go to not [knowing] who I was spending my weekends with. I thought that you know I had a strong GPA and it was just freshman year and I thought about leaving. I just didn't feel happy walking around campus.

Leila's experience points to the importance of acknowledging the interrelation between social integration, academic integration, and college persistence. Leila is working towards graduating a semester early due to her dissatisfaction with her social experiences in college (Tinto, 1993; Fischer, 2007). Previous research suggests that maintaining



these peer social networks lay a strong role in African American and first generation college students' persistence (Lin, 2001). In an attempt to find more structured opportunities to interact with peers with similar backgrounds, interests, and values, some participants decided to live in the African American themed dormitory, the W.E.B. Dubois College House.

**Living in Dubois College House.** Interestingly, four of the five participants each spent at least one academic year living in the African American themed dormitory, W.E.B. Dubois College House. The smallest of the eleven college houses at Penn, Dubois attempts to cultivate a strong sense of community by sponsoring and facilitating culturally relevant events and programs. While the building did not have some of the comforts of other dormitories on campus (such as central air conditioning and an elevator), students described the ways that Dubois did offer a familial setting for students and a safe space for students to cultivate new friendships. Patton (2006) described the role of cultural centers as a safe space for African American students on campus. Although not a "cultural center" per say, the afro-centric living community served in this capacity for students. It was a space where students could congregate socially and academically. Tatiana described how the computer lab was one space where students would socialize.

The computer lab is a very sociable place. It's not supposed to be but, many jokes have been cracked there. Many events have happened [laughter] and we're just like all... it's like a Pow Wow session. We study, we tell stories, stuff like that. That's probably a story of the camaraderie of Dubois.

A House Dean leads each College House and for Dubois it was "Ms. Connie." She was described as someone who was caring yet stern and adamant about students' safety. Within the Dubois community, students described how they were able to make a

number of friends. Robin lived in Dubois during her freshmen year, while Tatiana, Patrice, and Alysha moved to Dubois during their sophomore year. The main reason why these students decided to relocate was because they felt isolated and less than satisfied with their social connections in the other College Houses. Talking about her experience, Patrice shared:

I lived in a situation [freshmen year] where I had a single room but were in a suite. My suite was okay, but I was not very close with the majority of them...I think it was because of the fact that I was younger than everyone, and I had never been in a situation where I was like the actual only African American in a group of all those people, so that was weird...freshman year I didn't have as many friends [as I do now].

Tatiana also moved to Dubois in an effort to make more friends. She commented, "I made a lot of friends in Dubois...Some really good people, friends that I'm still cool with now, so that was great." Robin shared her overall impressions of the Dubois community compared to other dormitories on campus and how the College House attracted students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds:

Dubois was especially different as far as how they treat their students whether you're a freshman or a senior because it's very family oriented in that College House. I found living there that a lot of people who lived in like the high rises were actually kind of jealous of all the things we did there. We had freshman events, a Thanksgiving Dinner, a Christmas Dinner, a Valentine's Day [event]. All these different things to kind of make it very family oriented...Most of the people who lived there were African American but I found out that actually in recent times Asians and some Caucasians would go there because they would enjoy the comfier, cozier, type [of] living experience.

Previous research has highlighted the positive implications of living on campus for opportunities for academic and social engagement as well as college persistence (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1993). According to Padilla et al. (1997), finding a "like type community" is how students mitigate the lack of nurturing and lack of presence

barriers experienced by minority students at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Nurturing comes from creating a “supportive family on campus” (p. 131).

Patrice’s experience reflects this finding. For her, living in Dubois was a social turning point in her college experience. As a sophomore, she described having few social connections with students on campus, and often went home to New York on the weekends, further limiting her social interactions. During her time living in Dubois, Patrice met her best friend and was able to get engaged in some of the other organizations on campus. She shared, “Me and my roommate did a lot of stuff. I got to tour the city more. We went walking everywhere. Sophomore year was fun.” While none of the students in this study lived in Dubois beyond one academic year, they each acknowledged the ways that their time there opened them up to opportunities to meet and forge friendships with diverse individuals on campus.

**Student Involvement.** By students’ sophomore year, they each had become actively engaged in some campus organization. Many of these groups related to their interests such as music, dance, and education. Some were looking for connections within their major or college, while others wanted to find connections with other members of the larger Black community. Given the level of academic difficulty students experienced as freshmen, they each talked about being very selective in the types of organizations they involved themselves in initially. Leila described her experience:

Freshman year I didn’t really get involved much on campus beside the public speaking advising, so that was something that I made an effort to change sophomore year. I remember sitting down sophomore year and I went to the website and I looked up all the activities.

By joining organizations, students looked for a sense of belonging on campus, and to mitigate any feelings of isolation or alienation they had experienced on campus during

their first year. Through these clubs and organizations, students could in essence shrink the social world of campus, making what could be perceived as a large university as one that was smaller and more intimate (Charles, et al., 2009; Flowers, 1994; Tinto, 1992). Students' choices for campus engagement reflect their unique interests, cultural background and professional aspirations. Robin and Alysha, for example, joined singing and dance groups, while Leila and Tatiana were primarily involved in groups related to their professional aspirations. Patrice was engaged in community based work as well as a Black cultural student group. Through various organizations students were able to focus on other aspects of their college experience, and at times commiserate with their peers regarding the academic difficulty of life at Penn.

**Sense of Belonging.** The reasons students gave for why they joined specific organization over others were varied. One common theme was that each student was involved in some organization in which they were personally connected to; a group that they felt that they belonged to. Leila, for example, joined a group that was responsible for looking out for the well-being of other students through a peer hotline. She shared: "I really like that group just because everyone in there [is] very caring and good listeners. So, if I ever have an issue I know I can call one of them." Similarly, Robin described her peers in her singing group as not just friends, but as family. She shared: "I auditioned early in [freshmen] semester for an a capella group and I'd say that through them I developed what I would probably define as my family here at school." Patrice similarly shared a familial sense of belonging when described her participation in the Pan-African Student Association and the opportunities for her to explore her cultural heritage:

I sort of am in PASA – the Pan-African Student Association here. I don't go to all their events, but I do make an effort to attend almost all of them. That one's

really nice because all of us are sort of African and we share the heritage. We don't all speak the same language but we share the same culture. That's the group that I've been involved in the most. They hold a lot of events. They have discussions. They have parties. They have dinners.

Taken together, involvement in campus organizations and engagement with peers allowed students to forge meaningful friendships with members of the campus community and cultivate a sense of belonging on campus. Patrice's statement exemplifies the ways the she, Tatiana, Alysha, and Robin described their friendships on campus: "I've made friends that I'll have for really, for like probably ever."

**Isolation and Alienation.** While each student talked about the diversity of campus organizations and activities, they also suggested that there were some that were exclusive to certain populations by race or class. Not always perceived as a negative, this included some secret societies whose members were primarily affluent, White, or children of alumni. Some of these more exclusive organizations were Greek Lettered organizations, both historically Black and traditionally White as well as the honors societies on campus. Students knew that these types of organizations were primarily "by invitation only," but were not too concerned about joining them at the present. Leila, for example, decided not to join a sorority, while many of her friends did. This led to a hole in her social life from sophomore year on. She shared:

That group of friends [from freshman year], we are no longer a clique anymore [laughs]. It really impacted my freshman year a lot, second semester like 90% of my friends joined sororities, and I didn't. And then in addition to that a lot of them joined the same one.

While Leila did engage in other organizations and mentioned other friendship groups she has established, it is clear that this sense of alienation from her initial peer group negatively influenced her sense of belonging on campus, and ultimately led her to look

into transferring out of Penn. Ultimately she stayed but recognized that she is not satisfied with her overall social experience on campus.

Tatiana also shared her sense of isolation and alienation in terms of her engagement with her White peers, especially given she had no previous opportunities to engage with non-minority peers prior to college. She shared:

It's very rare that you'll hear from the Black people that come here that had all Black people, all minorities [in high school]. It's typically the other way around. They're the only minorities or one of the few. So their interactions with White people are different. Mine, it was a brand new experience. I'm living this from the ground up in college.

Attending predominantly minority schools, Tatiana had few opportunities to interact socially with White students, and consequently, at times felt uncomfortable engaging across race in this way. Robin shared that she was aware of the potential isolation that she could experience as a nursing student, given that there are relatively few students in her major, and the academic buildings are located outside of the main stretch of campus.

I've learned the importance of - I [say] this in contrast to kind of keeping to yourself – networking. I know it's important, like making sure you know more than one type of person. Making sure that your circle of friends aren't all the same people; branching out into different areas. I mean a lot of kids in the nursing school...all [of] their classes are there; their job is there; they eat there; they hang out with their friends there. They go to the nursing school like over there, and then they go home. In a vast university like this, I definitely learned the importance of visiting every part of campus.

From these experiences, students highlight that at some point during their time at Penn they felt either isolated or alienated socially on campus. Haussmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) assert that sense of belonging can be a predictor of intentions to persist among African American students in college. Despite these examples, however, students generally were able to find the positive social connections necessary to sustain them. Even Leila, who had was least satisfied with her social experience in college shared that

she too has been able to cultivate important relationships with peers or staff on campus to mitigate these feelings and persist at Penn.

### **Home Communities**

By in large, participants grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods and attended predominantly minority schools. After leaving home to attend Penn, they each described the slow and steady change they noticed in themselves as they engaged with their home communities less and less over the years. Previous research described the difficulty students have, particularly first generation or African American students, with straddling the two worlds of their home and campus community (Engle et al., 2006; London, 1992; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a). Students described this change as a part of the natural process of “growing up” and “changing” to become more independent adults in the world. Findings from this study suggest that students struggle to bridge the gap between their neighborhood and campus, but the gap appears to widen as students progress academically through college. Relationships with parents and siblings remained intact for the most part, but relationships with friends from home shifted and changed over time.

Students described the changes in their relationships with their family members after they began college. At first, several participants recalled going home quite often during their first semester as college students. Padilla et al. (1997) study suggests that there is often a greater cultural discontinuity between home and college environment for minority students attending PWIs; while this environment provides [majority students] with a sense of familiarity and security. Thus, as racial minorities on a predominantly White campus, going home was a way for participants in this study to reconnect with a familiar community. For Patrice, going home also allowed her to re-connect with her

family who was already reluctant about her attending college away from home. She shared her experience:

I went home a lot on the weekends because my parents guilted me into [it] because I'm the oldest child. I'm the first person to leave home. So I went home almost every weekend my first semester so I didn't do that much socializing actually. My parents actually wanted me to transfer back to a school in New York but I didn't want to so I just stayed here.

As first generation college students, participants struggled with communicating their early challenges within the Penn environment with members of their family. While they knew their parents would be supportive of them, there was a sense that they did not want to share their struggles or let their family members down. As high achievers, communicating with their parents that they were not performing academically as well as they expected to was particularly challenging. Robin expressed this sentiment as she attempted to communicate her experiences with her parents. She shared:

Especially with my dad, I was kind of like "oh everything is fine"... like throughout the semester it was sort of like, yeah it's tough, but I'm working it out...He did go to college but he didn't finish, so it's like a big thing for him as far as like go and finish, because he knows how tough it can get and he knows how quickly it could go south...it was really important for me to make it seem like even if I wasn't telling the truth, that everything was fine, that I was handling it. I didn't I mean it was like oh, I need to lie to my dad. I felt comfortable being truthful with him, but, you know, I just didn't want him to be afraid that I was screwing up, because he'd probably buy a plane ticket up here and make sure I was doing [well].

Similarly, Tatiana had a challenging time academically and socially within the Wharton School of Business. She decided it would be best to simply explain her experiences to her parents so that they could understand what she was going through. She shared:

My dad went to some college but it's been like a while ago. My mother never made it to college...My first year they didn't understand why I was struggling so much. So I had to sit down with them and explain to them, "Hey this is why." I



was going through a lot of depression; they were really concerned about me. But they understand now why [I was depressed] and they're very supportive.

Over time, being home made participants more aware of the differences between their campus and home communities. From Tatiana's experiences, she has become more aware of the socioeconomic differences between her home community outside of New York City compared to Penn, and this recognition has inspired her to work to improve the social conditions of individuals from her hometown. She shared:

It's weird coming back to the city that you came from and you view it as a different way. I've always viewed as "My God, we need to do better." But now going off to college it's like "My God, we really need to do better."

Alysha, who was born and raised in Upstate New York, described how amazed she is with how her world-view has changed by going to college. She shared:

It's so crazy...it amazes me when I think about how I was so close to staying in [my hometown]. If I would have done that...not that there aren't amazing people there too, I'm sure there are, but, the range in what I've learned and what I could have ever learned there are completely, just can't put them on the same level. And, like thinking about things, like wow. What if I would have made that choice? What would my life had been?

While students talked about the ways that they perceived their home communities differently overtime, they also talked about how being raised in their home community was very different from their experiences on campus. Of the students in the study, Tatiana shared the greatest sense of disconnection between her home community and that of the college campus. Bergerson (2007) found that going away to college for first generation, minority students can lead to culture and academic shock and challenges to an individuals' faith and value systems, particularly for students from working-class backgrounds. As a senior, Tatiana expressed that she is more at ease with the situation but she initially felt that she did not have the campus support system that could have

buffered her from these negative perceptions of the campus environment. Tatiana also shared that these feelings were most acute in the academic spaces on campus, within the Wharton environment. These feelings were buffered by making friendships with peers, who typically were not Wharton students, and through connections with the staff members in the PFP program and her Scholarship Program.

Perhaps most the most striking distinction students made was their changing relationships with friends, particularly with friends who remained in their hometown and/or did not go off to college. Robin, Alysha, and Leila, each talked about the ways that friendships from home have changed and ended over time. Robin connected this change with being a first generation college student:

A big part of being a first generation African American [college] student is that a lot of times in your circle of friends from back home you'll be the only one. It has a lot of different manifestations the first is that I just didn't say well you're going to lose a lot of friends from home. They're just going to go down a totally different path. It can be hard at first because, especially with someone like me who comes to a place where you don't know anyone or anything. They're kind of like supposed to be this foundation of familiarity and you can always come back to them, but that changes a lot and it also kind of changes your mindset.

Students talked about making difficult decisions regarding which friendships to maintain and which they had to sever so that they could focus on their own futures. Leila described how overtime it became difficult for her to feel connected with some of her close friends from high school. She attributed this to the changes she's experienced in her self while in college. She shared:

I just don't feel we had as much in common, and I do think I definitely changed from freshmen year...I'm sure they all have, but the ones who stayed in [hometown], I just feel like they haven't ground out of the [hometown] mentality.

Maintaining friendships from home was even difficult for Alysha, who found it difficult to remain friends with her longtime best friend who decided not to attend college. For

Alysha, the decision to sever the relationship was a difficult one, but one that she felt was necessary in order for her to focus on her own future. She shared:

It was kind of like I needed to break away, but I didn't want to. I feel like she needed [my] support, but at the same time I thought that in general if you're going to be friends with anybody, it should be reciprocal. If they're doing well, congrats. If they're not, I wish them the best.

Guiffrida's (2004) study of high achieving African American students found that when friends were viewed as asset to their college experience, they were maintained, while those viewed as liabilities were those friendships that ended shortly after students entered college. Similarly, students shared the few intact friendships from home are with other individuals who were also in college and who could relate to their new experiences, were understanding of the challenges associated with being a college student, and offered emotional support through students' transition. These complicate our understanding of the ways that students' home communities, through their relationships with family or with friends, can potentially facilitate or impede college persistence.

### **Summary of Social Experiences**

As evidenced by students' experiences, these African American, first generation college students were able to find communities on campus through which they could connect socially. Their interests and involvement stemmed from their precollege social experiences and the types of interactions they had with peers as middle and high school students. Their involvement in structured activities such as the Multicultural Scholars Preview Program and PFP fostered spaces for them to engage with other new students as well as meet upper-class students from diverse backgrounds. Involvement in campus organizations fostered opportunities for these participants to cultivate meaningful peer relationships with their fellow students on campus, both within and across racial

backgrounds. These findings suggest that students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds can potentially find “like-type” communities that reflect their values and interests within the context of a selective PWI. While students were finding these like-type communities on campus, they remained connected with their families and to a lesser extent, key friends from home who were strong sources of support particularly during their initial transition to college.

## **How do Students Mitigate Barriers to College Persistence?**

The experiences shared by the first generation, African American college women in this study revealed several factors that contributed to their persistence in college. Four themes emerged: maintaining financial resources, having a strong support network, exhibiting academic self-efficacy and resiliency, and the acquisition of social and cultural capital. While not discussed often, participants shared that the **financial resources** made available to them via institutional grants, scholarships, loans, and individual employment made college affordable. Even with these financial resources, participants actively sought out employment primarily to take care of personal expenses. Notwithstanding the financial and professional benefits of working, employment on and off campus at times interfered with students' academic responsibilities and opportunities to engage socially with campus. The potential barriers associated with working were mitigated by attempts to maintain balance between workload and academic responsibilities. Additionally, **support networks**, consisting of student's family, peers, and staff members on campus were credited as being critical for students to successfully navigate the academic and social spaces on campus and negotiate the expectations between home and school. These individuals served as sources of information, but more importantly sources of encouragement throughout students' college experience. From their experiences, students developed and exhibited **academic self-efficacy and resiliency**, portraying the attitudes and behaviors associated with a belief in their ability to overcome the potential barriers to college persistence throughout their time at Penn. Even though participants each encountered various personal challenges that could have derailed their plans to graduate, they were resilient and engaged in specific behaviors necessary for college

persist within the context of Penn. Taken together, students mitigated potential barriers to college persistence through the expansion and acquisition of their **social and cultural capital**, or by amassing the social networks and cultural knowledge necessary to successfully navigate the Penn environment.

### **Financial Resources**

Participants acknowledged that without financial support from the university, their families would not be able to afford a Penn education. Students credited the financial support received from the university in the forms of grants and work-study as being important for them to persist in college by minimizing the financial burden that college attendance would put on their families. With this minimal financial burden, they were able to live on or near campus, focus on their coursework, and participate in campus activities and events.

As first generation college students from families with modest financial resources, the availability of financial aid was a strong consideration for applying to and enrolling in college (Cabrera et al., 1992; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). In Leila's family, with two older daughters who attended private universities, they expected loans to be a significant portion of their financial aid package. Leila shared: "[My mother] just assumed and expected that if I went to a school that was expensive that I would have to take out loans." Fortunately, changes in financial aid policies over the past five years have contributed to practices that provide more financial aid in the forms of scholarships and grants for high achieving students from lower-income families. The participants in this study were aware of these policies at the University of Pennsylvania and other selective schools. This shaped their college choice process. Patrice shared:

I was looking at schools that had a really good financial aid, so I knew at Columbia they'd cover 100% of your need. At the one SUNY (State University of New York school) that I applied to they gave me a full scholarship and a stipend. So the ones that I applied to were a little more expensive but I knew they would be sensitive to need... Looking at Penn's sticker price, [laughter] that's a big, big, big turn off for a lot of people.

Financial aid was extremely important to Robin, who was traveling out of state for college. Although she had initially wanted to attend a different selective university in the mid-Atlantic region, her ultimate decision to attend Penn was based heavily on financial considerations. She shared:

Georgetown was my first choice and I'm actually not there right now because they wanted me to take out something like two and a half [years of] loans, and I was like, we just couldn't do that. I was really disappointed actually. I really did want to go there...but Penn was like, "You can come here for free." Like, ok! We did end up having to take out a loan but it wasn't because Penn wanted us to, it was because they gave us our set family contribution and we just kind of said, "Ok we're gotta get a loan." That is actually what it came down to.

The University of Pennsylvania has a "no loan" policy, where students from families within a particular financial bracket (income of \$60,000 per/year as of 2012) are awarded financial aid packages consisting only of federal and institutional grants and scholarships. The need-based financial aid package offered to students was enough to cover students' tuition and fees as well as room and board expenses. From the students' perspective, Alysha described the policy as follows: "They're on that whole no loan thing, which in reality means they're not going to force you to take out loans. They're going to cover as much as is not covered with your family contribution." Alysha went on to express the sentiment that the way that family contribution is calculated may not reflect the true income of a household, and what is being put aside (or not) for educational expenses. Nevertheless, students talked about the value of attending Penn in comparison to their

other college options, and that the benefits of earning a degree will outweigh the debt incurred as a student.

Each student had a different financial situation while in college. Robin, Patrice, and Leila's parents have completed their financial aid paperwork each year, and had less of a sense of the amount of money spent on their education. Tatiana was on a full outside scholarship, so she has never had to personally complete any financial aid documentation including the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). Alysha completed all of her own forms, and was most aware of the out-of-pocket expenses associated with college attendance. She specifically connected the cost of attendance with the importance of graduating, and perhaps graduating early. She shared:

I take out the max loans every year, except for this year...So I'm going to graduate with \$50,000 [in debt] basically, which is less than the price of one year here so I think that [balances out]...I made that decision and I have to deal with it. But, that's why I'm so tempted to try to graduate early. Everything is going to work out anyway.

Students mentioned that they continue to work with the financial aid office on campus to ensure that they are able to meet the yearly expenses associated with attendance. Patrice shared:

[Penn's] financial aid is very good and the people that work in the financial services department, they're all very nice and they really wanna help you. They have helped me before and still help me. I pay almost nothing to come here so that's really, really nice.

In contrast to her peers, Tatiana did not rely on financial aid from the university because she earned a full scholarship from a philanthropic foundation. This four-year scholarship, awarded when she was a high school junior, would have covered the cost of attendance at any college or university. As the recipient of a private scholarship, Tatiana had a different perspective as it relates to the importance of finances and her college



persistence. Not having to worry about finances has allowed her to focus on her academic responsibilities and take advantage of social and professional opportunities on and off campus. She shared:

My scholarship funded everything so I was really able to focus on straight academics. Our scholarship is a full ride. It's room and board, tuition, they gave me a book stipend and they gave me a semesterly stipend. If I wanted to study abroad they would pay for that. They paid for two plane tickets a year round trip. That's important because now I live [on the West Coast].

When describing barriers to college persistence and the impact of financial aid on Tatiana's experience, she stressed the importance of this scholarship and the support that went along with it given her challenges academically and socially on campus. She shared:

I truly believe that was the hand of God because it was just...it was just too much of a coincidence. My parents didn't have money. It wasn't like they saved up for me to go to college. I knew we were going to get some funding if we did FAFSA or financial aid, but the fact that everything was covered! I don't have a loan. I don't know what they are. I don't have debt graduating. That's a lot. I'm really grateful to not have to worry about that.

Previous studies have found a positive link between financial aid and college persistence (e.g. Avery et al., 2006; Cabrera et al., 1992; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) suggesting that adequate financial aid has the potential of facilitating college persistence for students, particularly for those from lower-income backgrounds. Having financial resources either through the university or through outside scholarships has helped to mitigate the financial burden associated with attending college. These resources however did not completely cover all expenses, particularly when it came to having money for non-educational expenses such as personal cellphones, new clothing, or trips to a restaurant or the movies. These expenses were almost exclusively covered through campus jobs.

**Work-Study.** Alysha, Leila, Robin, and Patrice each received work-study dollars as a part of the financial aid package. To supplement their financial resources and gain valuable professional skills, they each have engaged in work-study jobs on campus over the years, averaging about 15 hours per week. The primary reason students sought out employment during their freshman year was to take care of personal expenses. As Patrice explained, “I knew I had to work just because, I mean, even though I didn’t have to pay too much for tuition and all that stuff, just like basic living expenses I have to keep up myself.” Consequently, Patrice, along with Alysha and Robin found it necessary to find a work-study position within the first six weeks of their freshmen year. Tatiana, who obtained her first campus position as a senior, shared a more functional reason for working, thinking ahead to her pending graduation and the expenses she will incur as she transitioned into the workforce. Tatiana shared:

I have a work-study now due to the fact that I’m getting older and I really wanted that work experience one, and two I kinda wanted to save the extra money because of senior dues and finding an apartment. I’m trying to save a little bit more so that was important to me.

Some employment opportunities were found through personal connections, while others were found through the Penn network either online or via campus sponsored career fair events. Alysha, for example was able to find a research assistant position with one of her professors, allowing her to gain new experiences and connections in the field of marketing. She shared:

I was looking for another job, and she was looking for a research assistant. I emailed her, letting her know that I’m willing to learn, or just help out where I can. I know that [with] a research assistant position the pay is really good, so I really wanted one. I got to work with her in the summer, and she taught me in the fall. I continued working with her in the spring.

Working had several benefits for students; it exposed them to faculty members in their academic discipline, afforded them opportunities to explore potential career opportunities, and provided them with additional money to save for personal expenses (Flowers, 2010; Perna, 2010). Depending on the responsibilities, it actually helped them with their grades. Patrice shared:

I found a [front desk] job that I'm still working at now, which is not much work, so that was nice. I can basically study while at work, so that helped. It kind of forced me to study because I was with other people and I didn't want to watch tv the entire time. That helped with [my] grades.

Moreover, opportunities to engage in internships and experiences off campus or within the larger Philadelphia community allowed students to see the “bigger picture”, making connections between what they were learning in college and which careers they could engage in in the future. Leila and Patrice talked about their experiences working within the larger Philadelphia community. Tatiana spent a summer in New Jersey interning for a large company doing brand management. While reflecting on her experience, she shared:

I had a really, really, great experience and not a lot of people can say that in corporate America but I was highly comfortable. It was probably one of the best experiences I ever had. It was good cause I took a break from the uncomfortability that I was feeling here [at Penn].

Students did acknowledge, however, that at times working took away from the time to available to engage socially or academically with the campus community. Robin for example, has been a front desk assistant for an academic department since September of her freshman year. She described the challenges she's experienced with maintaining her work responsibilities and her academic responsibilities. She shared:

Work-study. I wouldn't consider it a burden at all; it's been one of the best things that has happened. But there are times when, it's not fair that classes are over and

some of these kids are going to go home, get comfy and start making these notes and getting their life together as far as the test that's coming up in two weeks. I have to go to work...Even though my job wasn't demanding, I did have to go to work, you know? There were times when I could have been studying or sleeping, and I had to be at work.

The financial resources afforded to students through Penn's financial aid or their own private scholarships allowed them to be able to afford to attend the university.

Notwithstanding this support, however, participants did have to work in order to take care of the personal expenses that go along with college attendance (e.g. cellphone bill, clothes, food, social event tickets). Working during college is increasingly becoming a necessity for students (Astin, 1993; Charles et al., 2009; Perna, 2010). Charles et al. (2009) found that, in comparison to White and Asians, African American students were more likely to work during their first year of college and perceived working to be of greater importance. Working in it of itself was not a barrier to persistence as long as students were able to find a balance between their work responsibilities, academic responsibilities, and personal needs. Since they literally could not afford to stop working, it was their academic and personal needs that were the first to be sacrificed.

There are mixed conclusions regarding to what extent working influences the experiences and persistence patterns of African American college students. Flowers (2010), for example, found that working while in college is positively related to student engagement, including collaborative learning and opportunities for student-faculty interaction. The study, however, did not go into the nature of students' work and how that could influence their experiences. Conversely, Bergerson (2007) found that working was negatively related to student engagement and could essentially further isolate students of color from opportunities to make meaningful connections with members of

the campus community. Ultimately, even within the context of a high-resourced institution like the University of Pennsylvania, the findings suggest that maintaining adequate financial resources continues to be a barrier for students from lower-income families. These findings suggest the importance of the continued investigation of the role of financial aid in college persistence, and how working can bolster or impede elements of students' college experience, including their academic performance, campus engagement, and postgraduate opportunities.

### **Support Networks**

Developing and maintaining strong support networks was also credited as being important for students to mitigate barriers to persistence. This support network was cultivated early in students' educational careers, beginning with their parents, siblings, teachers, and the significant others who invested in them academically and encouraged them to succeed. This early support system made students feel they were capable and worthy of attending the best of the best colleges out there, and continued to serve as sources of motivation once they began at Penn. Once students arrived on campus, this support network expanded to include peers and staff members on campus who helped students learn how to navigate the academic and social spaces on campus.

**Family Support.** Family members, particularly parents and siblings, were cited most frequently as students' primary source of support as college students. Participants shared that these individuals were the ones they could turn to for a listening ear, advice, or encouragement. As first generation college students, their parents had limited first-hand understanding of what students were experiencing on campus (Berger, 2000; Choy, 2001; Perna, 2006). Nevertheless, family members aided students in the initial transition to college by serving as a homebase of support that they could turn to as they the made

their initial connections with campus and learned how to navigate the academic and social complexities of campus.

*Parents.* With the exception of Robin who lived a far distance from campus, each of the participants talked about going home frequently during their first semester, often on weekends. Even when they couldn't physically go home, they frequently called or were called by their parents and siblings just to check-in on their progress or learn about what was going on at home. As participants became more familiar with and comfortable on campus, these visits and calls became less frequent, but in times of crisis, parents and siblings were still the first persons students turned to. Tatiana described how she was always able to rely on her family as a key source of support. She shared:

In total all four years, the only thing that stayed consistent was the amount of love that I got from home, the amount of support, and most importantly the amount of understanding I got...they just really believe in me and that means a lot to me. It really does.

Existing research contends that families of first generation college students may serve as a negative influence on student's persistence due to efforts to balance their responsibilities of both home and school (Engle et al., 2006; London, 1992; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a). In this study, however, students shared that their parents supported them throughout their college experience, at least in terms of encouraged and motivation. As high achievers through high school, these students have always been able to count on their parents as a source of encouragement and motivation, as parents have always held high expectations for their academic success. These expectations however, admittedly made it at times difficult to share challenging experiences with home. Robin, for example, explained that during times of challenge, connecting with her parents helped her figure out what she needed to do to be successful. Initially fearful of disappointing her

parents by her less than expected academic performance, after talking with her parents she noticed how her father changed his method of supporting her by reiterating that she *would* succeed. She shared:

I had a great support system [in] my dad. He took a different position after he saw how I was doing [academically] freshman year. He kind of took that, “I know that you can do this, you don’t have to use my failures as your vantage point”... he just always reminded that me that he knew I could do it...It was never a might or a maybe...we never ever considered failure as a possibility. That was probably what kept me going the most.

Although parents were deemed as an important source of support while in college, participants did acknowledge that at times they needed to distance themselves from home and the concerns of their family household in order to focus on their academic responsibilities. This was a difficult choice participants had to make given their strong connections to their family, however they viewed it as a necessary “short-term” separation that was the only way they could maintain the focus and discipline needed to survive within an environment like Penn. Robin reflected on how this could potentially be a barrier to persistence for African American students such as herself. She shared:

Craziness going on at home. I had to go home three times...I mean there have been more times than I can count where I [should] have been thinking about a test, but I worried about how I was going to help my mom pay this bill or help [my family]; just so many times.

Thus, there was a bit of a balancing act when it came to connecting with family members for support without taken on the extra burden associated with any family issues that may be going on at home. As a result, while it was extremely important for students to stay connected with their parents and siblings, they also had to maintain a bit of distance in order to remain focused on their goal of college graduation.

**Siblings.** In addition to the support received from parents, siblings were also an important source of support for students. As discussed previously, participants had at least one sibling pursuing post-secondary education at the time of their interview. Thus, their siblings had some understanding of their experiences, even though they were attending different institutions. Siblings were able to share their college experiences, allowing them to relate to one another differently, and prompted conversations about how they could support one another through college. Participants had different types of relationships with their siblings. Leila, who had older sisters who attended and completed college, remembers few instances where they sat down and talked about expectations for college and what college had been like for them. She shared: “I never really visited my sisters [in college]...Even when I was in high school I never really got a sense of “this is what college is like” from my sisters”. Patrice and Tatiana took it upon themselves to speak with their young sisters about their experience. Robin has made it a point to talk to her younger brother about the academic expectations for college so that he would not fall into the same patterns that she had. Overall, participants shared that siblings were individuals they could turn to in order to share their experiences, were sounding boards when it came to making decisions, and ultimately were an important source of motivation for their continued college persistence. As older siblings, they viewed themselves as role models, and this made it that much more important to them that they were successful. Tatiana’s reflection sums up this sentiment; she shared:

Sometimes you do have that feeling of “I don’t wanna finish this...I don’t wanna do this” because it’s really, really difficult. But I have two other siblings that I have to watch out for and I’d be an awful example if I didn’t finish and then my sister who’s in [college] tried to drop, and my brother doesn’t want to go.



Contrary to the literature that describes the families of first-generation and African American college students as potential liabilities for their educational success, the experiences of the participants in this study suggest that families can be an integral component of students' support network (Saenez, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). These individuals directly and indirectly served as sources of encouragement and motivation despite, or perhaps because of their own limited experience with higher education. Throughout their educational trajectory, participants have learned which individuals they could maintain ties with, and which individuals they had to part ways with. Oftentimes, these decisions contributed to the changes in the relationships with peers from home, and the desire to develop meaningful relationships with peers on campus.

**Peer Support.** With time, participants began to cultivate relationships with their fellow peers on campus. Participants talked about three types of peer relationships: relationships with upper-classman, with friendships, and their professional peer networks. First, participants described their relationships with upper-classmen, primarily other African American or minority students, who served as peer role models for college persistence. Next, were the friendships cultivated with peers, where participants acknowledge that they had at least one person whom they considered to be a "best friend" that they felt comfortable sharing the more intimate aspects of their college experiences. Finally, participants engaged in relationships that were more professional in nature with individuals in their major or field of interest. Taken together, these peers were credited as sources of support when it came to not only adjusting to the academic and social

climate of campus, but also for having someone with whom they could share their accomplishments, fears, and plans for the future.

*Peer role models.* Exposure to upper-class students during participants' visits to campus and experiences in summer bridge programs was the first way participants acknowledge the role that peers played as sources of support. As a participant in the PENNCAP summer Pre-Freshmen Program (PFP), Robin was impressed with the caliber of the students she interacted with. She shared:

I got to spend a lot of time with people who were already students here, both graduate students and undergraduates when I did [PFP]. Usually they were top-notch kind of students... So I kinda got some exposure to some of the great people I've met here.

For Robin, her on campus job has afforded her with continued exposure to other undergraduate and graduate students, which has been important for her even though these individuals are typically in her nursing program. This contact with advanced students, particularly African American students, has helped her not only envision herself in their place, but also has positioned her to gain information about various campus resources.

Students also looked to upper-class students as role models within the classroom. As students in the Wharton School of Business, Tatiana and Alysha talked about the ways students would attempt to cultivate relationships with one another in order to manage their academic load. This behavior extended to other courses outside the major as well. Tatiana shared her experience:

For my minor I was typically the only Black person, I mean [that] makes sense because it is a Japanese focused class. There was one other student who was Black who became like my mentor. He was a year older than me. He really took me under his wing and helped me out, so that was nice.

Outside of the classroom, participants talked about how the upper-class students they met through shared interests and social organizations also has had a positive impact on their experiences. Alysha talked at length about a Latina student she met during her sophomore year who she viewed as a role model and great friend. She shared:

That [relationship] was life changing because she and I got really, really close. She was a senior so it was really sad when she graduated, but having her as a support system...we went through a lot last year. Like a lot of [experiences]...I'm mad she's gone, but she's one of my closest friends.

Overall, participants identified at least one person who they viewed as a peer role model either academically or socially within the Penn community. Some of these role models with time became good friends.

***Friendships.*** Students described having one or two “best friends” on campus that they were able to turn to for support. Each of these relationships was formed during their time as students at Penn. Some of these individuals were met during their first year, while others took a while to find. Alysha, Robin, and Tatiana expressed that they felt that they were able to find their “best friends” on campus during their experience in summer bridge programs. This experience meeting and interacting with a smaller sub-set of the campus community was a good way for them to open themselves up to the social opportunities of college life. The support Tatiana found through relationships with friends on campus helped mitigate negative experiences within her college. She shared:

Multicultural scholars preview and PFP made me so, so, so, so comfortable. My two best friends, one of them was my roommate from PFP, the other one went to PFP with me, we sat together in math class and we still talk...my relationships with them, they are an extension of me in my opinion. They are like a brother and sister to me...that's family. I wouldn't have gotten that if it wasn't for PFP. They were the ones [who were there] when the going got tough.

Through these new friendships, participants found individuals with whom they were comfortable sharing their academic challenges and plans for the future. Together they would also explore the social aspects of college life. Robin shared some the activities she would engage in with her close friends: “We just all kinda hang out; we’re all just like really close. We go to all of the parties together, we study together, it just kinda happened naturally.” These new friendships were important, especially since participants talked about how they were no longer in contact with individuals from home who at one point considered to be their best friends. Robin shared:

It’s just no one in my close circle of friends, none of them went out of state for school, they’re all still in [the South]. And then we all get back together... and it’s like I’m the only one who hasn’t been home. I’m the only one who hasn’t been in tuned with what’s been going on. So that’s definitely another small barrier... You gotta make new friends, you gotta find someone else who shares that vision.

With this in mind, participants talked about their new friends as being individuals who would be a part of their lives for a long time, and were closer friendships than the ones they cultivated with friends from home. As Tatiana shared, “the friends that I have now are the people I can actually see me still being friends with after I graduate, which was new to me. Having gone here, it [has] increased my trust in others.”

**Peer networks.** Finally, participants described the support they received from their overall peer network both academically and socially. A chemistry major, Patrice talked about how her connections with students in her major have been very important both inside and outside of the classroom. She shared:

Second semester [freshman year] the [chemistry] class that I took was meant for majors, so it was a lot smaller and I got to know a lot more people in my major...and so kind of jumping to now, we’re all always together because all of our classes are all major classes ...and we’ve all kind of formed a very solid friendship.

Given her participation in the McNair Scholars' Program, Patrice has expanded her peer network to include other students at Penn and at other universities who have expressed their interest in graduate study through her participation in the summer research program.

She shared:

This summer I was at Rutgers doing the summer research program...and the summer was a lot, a lot of fun. It was about 40 of us. We all lived together in one house...It made for a good summer. The people in the program were really great...we would sort of plan weekend trips and explore the cities, New York, Boston, DC...we made very good friends and we had a lot of fun.

As someone who lived a relatively sheltered pre-college life, Patrice recognizes that these opportunities to engage with others have really shaped her outlook on the future.

Similarly, Alysha recognized early on the importance of having an expansive social and professional peer network. For her, this began during her time in the summer bridge programs. She shared:

First and foremost do PENNCAP or Africana...some pre-freshman program to get you started on opening yourself up. You don't want to be that freshman who comes in in September and is like, "let me try to figure out what to do now." If you've already started that, you've already made 50 connections. You don't know how they're going to impact you down the line. Get to know people.

Following this philosophy, Alysha has been actively involved in several organizations including a multicultural dance troupe and business fraternity to cultivate these relationships. These organizations are highly diverse in terms of gender and race and she is amazed at the number of people she knows on campus through these connections.

Astin (1993) identified the peer group, defined as "a collection of individuals with whom the individual identifies and affiliates and from whom the individual seeks acceptance or approval," as the single most important influence on college students' learning and personal development (p. 398). Participants expressed the importance of having a peer network that went across different academic and social domains, something

that they didn't necessarily feel was important as high school students. The benefits of these student-student interactions are both academic and non-academic in nature, contributing to improved attitudes about learning, enhanced leadership skills, and greater awareness of the college environment and resources therein (Flowers, 2010; McFeeters; 2010; Padilla et al., 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Engaging in different types of peer relationships allowed students to expand their social network and tap into this network in order to gain the support and information necessary for college persistence. For students who desire opportunities to interact with others from similar cultural backgrounds, the perceived diversity of the campus environment at Penn allowed for these interactions to occur. These relationships evolved into supportive networks of peers with whom students could interact with both inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1997). The cultivation of new on-campus friendships with peers appeared to be essential to students' sense of belonging on campus (Hausmann, et al., 2007). These findings suggest that challenges associated with social isolation due to low minority student enrollment or limited diversity within the overall student body on college campus may not be as large of an issue as it was once reported to be, at least not within the context of this selective, private, predominately White university (Allen, 1992; Bowen, et al. 2005; Padilla et al., 1997).

**Staff Support.** In addition to peers on campus, staff members served as a knowledgeable resource in terms of connections to academic resources and professional networks, and were identified as mentors and role models for success. Whether it was someone in their academic department, or a staff member affiliated with a campus program, these individuals helped students connect to the larger campus community and

were often described as students' parents away from home. Support from staff was particularly important for students during their initial transition from high school to college both academically and socially. As described previously, participating in the bridge programs PFP and Africana facilitated early access to knowledgeable members of the campus community who shared with them not only the potential challenges associated with being a African American student at Penn, but also the strategies they could utilize to mitigate these potential barriers to persistence. This was particularly important for students who may at times question whether they were worthy of the opportunity to attend an elite university like Penn. Robin discussed how reminding herself of the messages shared during her time in Africana helped her focus on her goals.

She shared:

I guess they had this fear that a lot of us did feel like we didn't belong and [would] feel somewhere along the way that we weren't the smart girl or the smart guy that we were anymore. But, [the staff] would continually throw it in our face like, "remind yourself that you belong here. You earned your spot!" I lost sight of it freshman year, but I just kept reminding myself that I deserved it.

Participants frequently cited the PENNCAP office and the Pre-Freshman Program (PFP) as important sources of support both academically and socially. Through participation in PFP, students were able to move to campus early, preview the academic expectations for college, and begin cultivating friendships with new and continuing students. After the summer program, students were encouraged to maintain their relationships with the staff counselors, who shared strategies for academic success, checked in frequently on them, and forwarded them information about academic resources and opportunities for personal and professional development. Participants shared several examples of the ways that the staff members within the PENNCAP office

continued to serve as sources of support throughout their time at Penn. Alysha, Leila, Tatiana, and Robin each shared examples of instances where they were provided with specific and timely information that contributed to their persistence. This included information about time management, tutoring, financial resources, or professional test preparation. Participants typically worked with the professional academic counselors in the office each semester. With time, these relationships became personalized and staff members were viewed as second parents. Alysha shared her viewpoint:

[PENNCAP] has always been a part of my life in some way shape or form. They always have workshops, field trips, and my peer advisor she's just like a mom. She's a mom during the [summer] program, she's a mom afterwards. She always likes to check on us at least once each semester, find out what our goals are...Every time I go to her I'm like "Yeah everything's fine" but she looked at my grades, she's like "Alysha, you know you can do better..." So she's always there if I need someone to talk to or any of us ...she's like the mom away from home.

Similarly, Patrice shared examples of the positive influence the McNair program staff has had on her experience since entering the program as a rising junior. She views the directors as caring individuals who go above and beyond their job to support her and her fellow McNair scholars. She shared:

I think that the two people here at Penn that I am the closest to are the directors of the McNair program. They are so very, very helpful and they care about us so much. They're sort of like my parents here. You can go to them with anything.

Other staff members noted for being key sources of support were those affiliated with the scholarship program on campus. Tatiana spoke very highly of the director of the program, and the ongoing support she has received through their relationship. She shared:

She's just so vast in terms of her knowledge of what it's like [to be a student] because she went to Wharton grad. It's nice to talk to her about [that]. [She's]



also one of the most approachable people you ever met, she fights for you if she believes in you [and] she believes in all of us. My internship I was able to find through research and working with the scholarship, and she put me in connections with people who got me there so that was beyond a Blessing...She is just really, really, really hands on and I'm eternally grateful to her and the foundation.

These findings suggest that on-campus support programs can serve as a proxy for home for African American, first generation college students on campus (Fries-Britt, 1999).

These programs functioned as a safe haven for students to ask questions of the staff members and gain information about how to be successful at Penn. Furthermore, these findings reflect previous research on how participation in campus support programs can positively assist students in adjusting to college academically and socially (Astin, 1993; Engle et al., 2006; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Freeman, 1999; Padilla et al., 1997). Even though the students in this study were high achievers through high school, they too experienced challenges adjusting to the rigor of college. Freeman (1999) investigates a common misconception that high achieving high school do not need services and support to adjust to the rigors of college. She argues that the fact that being a top student in high school sets up a pressure to excel, and may threaten students' successful academic and social adjustment to higher education settings. Consistent with the experiences of students in this study, high achieving students benefit from support provided to them by knowledgeable adults who are familiar with campus policies and procedures, can direct them to campus resources and opportunities for professional development, and can listen to them as they share their aspirations, worries, hopes and goals. Furthermore, as participants also talked about the challenges associated with personally recognizing that they needed academic help, having staff members on campus that specifically reached out to them and worked with them overtime has been one of the ways that these high

achievers became more comfortable with seeking out the academic resources available on campus. By working with staff members associated with the academic programs on campus, they were able to gain information about strategies and resources available to them to foster academic success.

### **Academic Self-Efficacy and Resiliency**

In addition to their external sources of support, students relied heavily on their own academic self-efficacy or *belief* in their ability to succeed and exhibited resiliency throughout their time in college. Each participant, as evidenced by their current status as college juniors and seniors, have exhibited resiliency as they successfully navigated the educational pipeline. Recognizing that their socioeconomic status and racial background could potentially put them educationally at risk, these participants relied on their personal support system and the belief in their own skills and abilities to overcome the obstacles that they met along the way.

**Academic Self-Efficacy.** Students entered college confident in their academic skills and readiness for college. Participants used words and phrases such as “smart,” “hard working,” “focused,” “driven”, and “persistent” to describe themselves as students throughout their precollege experience. These traits were confirmed by being the top of their class academically and through the accolades and privileges bestowed upon them by their teachers and counselors. Their status as “good students” was also affirmed by their acceptance into the University of Pennsylvania, a prestigious and highly selective university. Their first semester however, presented a challenge, as they had to learn to adjust not only to the new campus environment, but also to the academic expectations of the Ivy League. Given their strong academic background, when faced with the

challenges of meeting the academic and social demands of college they were able to regain their footing by recalling their previous experiences of success and intrinsic values of education to remain motivated to maintain the attitudes and engage in the behaviors that would lead to success. As Tatiana shared, “college is hard; it’s really difficult. But I can’t imagine myself not finishing because it’s ingrained in my brain, “I have to do this.”

With time, students began engaging in academic behaviors linked with success, including adopting time management strategies, strategically planning their semester course load, and taking advantage of campus academic resources, although minimally. The decision to utilize campus based academic resources was a difficult one for students; they preferred to figure things out on their own and avoided asking for help. These findings are supported by Tinto (1993), who claims, “the ability of students to meet academic standards is related not only to academic skills, but also to positive academic self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, and familiarity with the academic requirements and demands of the institution” (p. 73).

**Resiliency.** Closely related to the concept of academic self-efficacy, resiliency refers to the ability to overcome obstacles, and in this case refers to the academic and social challenges encountered by participants throughout their educational trajectory (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Participants engaged in self-reflection and positive self-talk to overcome the challenges they encountered as college students. For Robin, maintaining positive thoughts about her success was key to her persistence. She shared, “I never said to myself “what if I do actually fail?” Like that just kind of...it’s just a foreign thought for me...I never allowed failure to be a possibility.” Participants often talked about not giving up, not losing hope, and not being discouraged. For Patrice, she felt that in the

field of science, too often students became despondent about their grades and are pessimistic about their prospects for graduate school. For her, it's been important to remain positive and reflective during times of challenge. She shared:

[You can't] be discouraged very easily. I know people, especially pre-meds, they'll not have such great grades and they kind of just lose all hope. Sometimes you just need to take a step back, breath, and figure out you know, what you did and what you could have done better. Because there is generally always something that you could have done better.

Finally, participants engaged in the behaviors necessary for persistence including becoming better at managing their time, strategically organizing their academic scheduled to maximize balance, engaging in student clubs and organizations, and seeking out the academic resources necessary for success. The importance of seeking out academic resources is admittedly the one area that many of the participants continue to struggle with. Tatiana shared her perspective related to help seeking within a competitive academic environment:

Don't be afraid to ask a question. That's a big one for me. I wasn't afraid to put myself in a vulnerable position and be like, "Hey, I need help." You know us Penn kids are a little bit prideful because we got into the Ivy League... When you break down that ego and you get into a vulnerable position that's when you learn the most in my opinion. I think I learned the most and I developed a lot of skills from asking for help. It's nothing wrong with saying "I don't know what I'm doing." I say, "I don't know what I'm doing" all the time and I think that's made me a better person because I'm being honest.

The findings from this study suggest that high academic self-efficacy coupled with support structures and individual resiliency can help students from diverse backgrounds persist within competitive college environments. Bean and Eaton (2000) argue "students who adopt the *attitude* that they fit in certain academic environments are likely to become more academically integrated" (p. 49). Therefore, in order to persist in college, students must build positive self-efficacy, engage in a variety of stress reducing

coping strategies, and develop an internal locus of control (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). Consistent with their findings, by engaging in self-reflective practices, the students in this study relied on the knowledge that they were previously academically successful and attributed their struggles not their own personal inadequacies but to the differing expectations between high school and college. Efficacy beliefs influence behaviors, the amount of effort exerted, perseverance in the face of challenges and failures, and the ability to cope with various demands (Chemers et al., 2001; Lent et al., 2005; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). Taken together, participants mitigated barriers to persistence through the internal belief that any challenge they encountered while college would be overcome with a little faith, a little support, and a lot of hard work.

### **Expansion of Cultural and Social Capital**

As participants navigated their academic and social experiences in college, they expanded their cultural and social capital. Cultural capital refers students' attitudes, cultural knowledge, and language skills (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006). Through coursework, opportunities to engage with diverse peers, experiences working on and off campus, and exploration of the city of Philadelphia, students expanded their horizons, and gained greater confidence in terms of their ability to live and work in a diverse global society. Participants talked about wanting to take advantage of study-abroad opportunities, looking forward to travelling to different countries such as Mexico, England, Costa Rica, and South Africa, and their interest in becoming fluent in languages such as Spanish, Italian, and Japanese. Many of these interests were piqued from the experiences of peers who engaged in these types of activities. Alysha recognized the impact of her time at Penn has shaped her worldview. She shared:

It amazes me when I think about how I was so close to staying in [my hometown]. If I would have done that, not that there aren't amazing people there too, I'm sure there are, but, the range in what I've learned and what I could have ever learned there are completely - just can't put them on the same level...Wow. What if I would have made that choice? What would my life have been [like]?

Participants described this expanded worldview using positive terms, not expressing a sense that they had to change who they were in order to meet the cultural expectations of the members of the campus community. Within the minority student community on campus, participants felt comfortable expanding their cultural capital and did not express a sense that they were pressured to adjust who they were in order to "fit it" among their peers.

Active and strategic involvement in various groups and communities on campus has been the main way participants have expanded their social capital while in college. Social capital refers to the knowledge and resources derived from relationships with individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). The social capital students entered college with was primarily derived from relationships cultivated through their parents, or from their own relationships with teachers and school counselors who had access to information about higher education (Perna & Titus, 2005). Once students entered college, they had some sense of the importance of creating new social networks with members of the campus community. For this reason, participants talked about the importance of attending summer bridge programs, for example. As described previously, these networks became key components of their support system. Each participant acknowledged that it took them time to adjust to and adapt to the expectations of college in general, and those specific to pursuing their majors at Penn. Tatiana shared:

I think having a good support system on campus is highly important. Whether it's friends, family, or otherwise...But it took me until about sophomore year to find

my group of people that fit me the best. So it took kind of a lot of kinda soul searching and people searching.

According to Padilla et al. (1997) students successfully overcome barriers to persistence by “seeking out nurturing persons, regardless of ethnicity, such as special friends, faculty members, staff members, or other students; and using resources such as faculty advisors, tutors, and various other institutional staff members and support systems” (p. 131). The expansion of students’ cultural and social capital has helped mitigate barriers to this adjustment by allowing them to learn campus specific or heuristic knowledge about the campus and engage in meaningful relationships with knowledgeable members of the campus community (Padilla, et al., 1997). Through their multiple sources of support, students have access to social, cultural, and financial capital, which was invested to increase the likelihood of positive educational outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986, Lin, 2001).

### **Summary of Barriers**

From their experiences, the participants in this study identified the barriers to college persistence as not having adequate financial resources, not having a strong, multifaceted support system, and losing self-confidence in one’s ability to succeed when faced with academic challenges. Using various strategies, students were able to mitigate these potential barriers through financial support from the University, by maintaining relationships with their parents and siblings, by cultivating strong supports on campus with peers and staff members, and by engaging in self-reflective practices particularly during times of challenge. Moreover, by engaging in self-nurturing, knowing their self worth, depending on themselves and significant others, and being persistent about their own needs, participants exhibited resiliency and determination as students at Penn.

Taken together students were able to learn various campus specific strategies for navigating the academic and social realms of the campus environment through the expansion of their cultural and social. Through their experiences at Penn, students gained knowledge and information about what is necessary for success, gained access to opportunities for professional development, and gain a new perspective on themselves and what they could accomplish in the future.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

This study sought to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of five African American, first generation college women attending University of Pennsylvania, a private, selective, predominantly White university. Through demographic questionnaire responses and individual semi-structured interviews, the participants identified the ways that their collegiate experiences were shaped by their social identities, precollege academic and social experiences, and interactions with members of their campus and home communities. In the next and final chapter, I present a discussion of these findings, while exploring the broader implications of these findings for policy, practice and future research.



## **Chapter 6: Implications and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending a selective university. Following interpretive case study methodology, this study sought to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 2) How do African American, first generation college students describe their social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?
- 3) How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence?

Through demographic questionnaire responses and three individual semi-structured interviews, the participants identified the ways that their collegiate experiences were shaped by their social identities, pre-college academic and social experiences, and interactions with members of their campus and home communities. The sample consisted of five participants, all African American, women, and first generation college students enrolled as juniors and seniors at the University of Pennsylvania.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the context for the study, followed by a summary of the findings presented in Chapter Five. What follows is a discussion of the research findings within the context of the literature on the collegiate experiences of African American and first generation college students. Included in this discussion is the

presentation of the implications of the research for theory, policy, and practice. Next, I discuss the study's limitations and conclude with recommendations for future research.

### **Overview of the Study**

There has been a steady increase in the number of African American students attending private four-year institutions, rising from 8.0% in 1980, to 11.1% in 2000, and 16.7% in 2009 (NCES, 2010a). Scholars have found that attending a four-year institution increases the likelihood that students will persist and earn a bachelor's degree (Cabrera, Burkham, & LaNasa, 2003; Goldrick-Rabb, 2006). For the 2001 cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen, the 6-year graduation rate for African American students at private four-year institutions was 45.6%, compared to 40.1% for African Americans at public four-year institutions (NCES, 2010b). The selectivity of private colleges and universities also contributes to differences in graduation rates. At the "most selective" private institutions (institutions which admit 25% or less of applicants), the 6-year graduation rate for African Americans is even higher; some examples include 96.6% at Harvard University, 95.6% at Yale University, and 93.5% at Princeton University (College Results.org, 2012).

The personal and societal benefits of pursuing postsecondary education are well documented. These benefits include involvement in extracurricular activities, opportunities to participate in various social and cultural events, higher lifetime earnings, increased civic participation, better health, longer life, and a lower probability of unemployment (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Bowen, 1997; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Torbin, 2005; Perna, 2005). Previous studies have shown that graduates of selective institutions tend to experience greater overall gains both financially and socially compared to

graduates of less selective institutions (Astin, 1993; Bowen & Bok, 1995; Bowen et al., 2005; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Dale & Krueger, 1999; Fischer & Massey, 2006; Walpole, 2008). The increasing numbers of African American students entering and succeeding in selective institutions of higher education provides a perfect opportunity to explore the academic and social experiences of students within this context. Few studies, however explicitly explore the collegiate experiences of minority students attending selective institutions of higher education. Moreover, of the studies available African American students are described as a monolithic group, limiting an analysis of how their various social identities intersect to shape collegiate experiences within this context. Consequently, there is a paucity of research available to understand how the intersection of one's race, class, gender, and academic ability shape students' academic and social experiences as college students. As more African American students from diverse backgrounds enter and succeed in postsecondary education, there is a need to explore the unique experiences of this population across various dimensions in order to provide information about how students experience college, and discover what institutions can do to support their educational journey. To this end, this study sought to extend our understanding of the within-group differences of African American colleges students by exploring the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students at a private, highly selective, predominantly White university.

Three frameworks were selected to inform the conceptual lens for the study: Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Output College Impact Model; Padilla's (1997) Local Model of Minority Student Success in College; and Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital. Each perspective added important factors useful for

understanding the academic and social experiences of African American and first generation college students within the context of a selective university. Moreover, this study's design was informed by an extensive review of the literature in the areas of college retention, the college experience, and college environments. Specifically, these topics include: factors affecting college persistence and retention for first generation students, African American students, and low-income students; predominantly White Institutions (PWIs); selective colleges and universities; high achieving and gifted students; and the impact of college environments on student experiences.

### **Overview of Methods**

This study followed qualitative methods and an interpretive multiple case design to present a detailed illustration of the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college women who attend a selective institution of higher education. In this study, each participant is a "case" bounded by her experiences within the context of the University of Pennsylvania, a selective institution of higher education. In bounding the cases in this manner, each student's social, cultural, and personal experiences are not simply described, but can be understood in relation to the interactions that each individual have encountered over time. Additionally, cross-case analysis was used to understand commonalities and differences across participants' experiences within this institutional context. Consistent with case study methodology, data for the study was collected via a variety of methods. I collected primary data from each participant through their demographic questionnaire and responses from three semi-structured individual interviews conducted with each participant over a five-month period. The time spent with each participant ranged from approximately 112 minutes and 180 minutes.

Secondary data consisted of a review of institutional documents and reports as well as and informal observations of campus events and activities. Primary and secondary data was utilized to compile a rich and detailed case description of each participant, their academic and social experiences, as well as provide a rich context for their perceptions of the educational environment within the University of Pennsylvania.

Purposeful sampling methods (Merriam, 2009) were used to select the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) for this study (see Chapter 3: Research Site for more details about the site). I also used purposeful sampling techniques to select participants to secure information rich cases. I interviewed 5 students for this study. Each participant met the specified criteria for inclusion in the study: at least 18 years of age and, (1) self-identify as African American or Black, (2) a first generation college student (defined as neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree) and (3) a junior or senior at the University of Pennsylvania. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis is the process of "bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 150). For this study, data was primarily collected in the forms of interviews and demographic questionnaires. My data analysis was completed in several stages. First, after organizing the data and coding transcripts by categories aligned with my conceptual framework, I created individual case profiles for each participant. These profiles were highly descriptive in nature and included information gathered from students' individual interviews and demographic questionnaire. Next, in reference to the research questions, I engaged in cross-case analysis to identify the prominent themes that cut across participants' experiences. During this process, additional categories were developed for emergent themes not

addressed by these research questions or in the initial literature review. NVivo 10, a computer assisted qualitative software package, was utilized to support organizing, coding, and the retrieval of data.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study's findings are described in detail in Chapter Five and are summarized here by the research questions guiding this study.

#### ***Emergent Findings: What new is learned about the experience of African American, first generation college students at a selective institution of higher education?***

Data analysis revealed the intersectional nature of students' experiences, and highlighted several instances where students described their academic experiences, social experiences, perceptions of the campus environment, and perceptions of barriers to college persistence in relation to their embodied social identities. Students specifically described how their race, class, academic sense of self, gender, and spirituality, influenced how they engaged with the campus environment. Moreover, it was apparent that the expression of each student's identity played out differently depending on the context of her interactions with others (e.g. academic settings versus social settings, on-campus versus off-campus). The intersection of students' race, gender, and academic ability, for example, shaped their precollege interactions with peers contributing to being perceived as the "smart girl" or the "smart Black girl" in their class year. Given these early interactions, students' decision to attend Penn was influenced by their view of it as a college environment where there were a number of other minority students who also identified themselves as high achievers. Taking into consideration students' social class identity, these high achieving African American women were encouraged to apply to

selective institutions of higher education despite having limited financial resources.

Students were made aware and took advantage of scholarship opportunities and financial aid policies that benefited students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. On Penn's campus, students' social class identity was rarely salient, but became heightened in situations where they perceived themselves to be one of few lower-income students in any particular setting (e.g. academic space or social space). Finally, as members of the African American community on campus, students were aware of the similarities and differences between themselves and other members of the Black community based upon their social identities. Nevertheless, students shared the perspective that they found the community to be unified and appreciative of these differences within the group.

In regards to students' gender identity, students provided examples of how their family role as daughters and sisters, as well being women within their home and community contexts, shaped their experiences. First as daughters, students talked about the expectations from their parents to be academically focused and personally responsible for their actions. These high standards for academic success helped students to develop and internalize their own positive values about education. Students also highlighted the perceived differences in their upbringing (e.g. greater emphasis on academic achievement, earlier curfews) compared to their brothers, and credited many of these differences to gendered expectations perpetuated by society at large.

As first generation college students, students' college experience served as a model for their younger siblings. Students used their own experiences to provide tips and suggestions for the college choice process and how their siblings could successfully navigate college. As sisters, students were expected to be a positive role model for their

siblings. Four of the five students in this study, Alysha, Patrice, Robin, and Tatiana are each the eldest child in their families. They each described their sense of responsibility to succeed in order to serve as a positive role model for college persistence for their younger siblings. Remembering this sense of responsibility helped students persist during times of challenge.

As women, students shared a duality in expectations coming from both their home and collegiate communities. Students grew up keenly aware of the various portrayals of African American women, both positive and negative, within their community. At home, they were sometimes seen in negative stereotypes, at other times they were “put on a pedestal” for their accomplishments to date. In college, they dealt with the pressures associated with high expectations for achievement, while at the same time felt empowered to explore their independence and womanhood.

Finally, students’ spirituality emerged as students attempted to make sense of their overall life choices and experiences. The salience of spirituality varied across participants. For Tatiana and Alysha, spirituality was an important aspect of their identity, largely rooted in their religious affiliation with the Christian religion. These beliefs served as a guide for how they lived their daily lives. Robin, Patrice, and Leila were more implicit in the ways they connected their spiritual sense of self with their academic and social experiences in college. Across all participants, however, spirituality functioned as an internal source of strength, particularly during times of challenge.

***Research Question #1: How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?***



The findings reveal that students' academic experiences were shaped by their pre-college experiences at home and at school, the rigorous academic expectations for their major, and their interactions with faculty and staff on campus. First, participants identified their parents as highly influential for setting the standard for academic excellence early. Through their ongoing encouragement and involvement, parents structured opportunities for students to become high achievers throughout elementary, middle, and high school. Students provided numerous examples of the ways their parents implicitly and explicitly emphasized their values for education and expectations for academic achievement. Parents also provided students with a stable home environment that allowed them to focus on their academic pursuits. Moreover, family members served as a source of motivation and encouragement to persist in higher education.

Experiences in elementary, middle, and high school also played an important role in these students' academic experiences in college. As high achievers, they were selected out to participate in other college preparatory activities to give them the academic foundation necessary to succeed at the collegiate level. Participation in advanced and honors courses exposed students to advanced teaching practices, and for some, cultivated initial interest in their chosen college majors. While in school, students made meaningful connections with teachers and counselors who worked with them, and at times challenged them to maintain their high achiever status.

Once in college, students described their initial challenges with adjusting to the academic expectations and rigor of their chosen major. By engaging in self-reflective practices, they relied on the knowledge that they were previously academically successful and attributed their struggles not to their own personal inadequacies but to the differing

expectations between high school and college. With time, students began engaging in academic behaviors linked with success, including adopting time management strategies, strategically planning their semester course load, and taking advantage of campus academic resources, although minimally. The decision to utilize campus based academic resources was a difficult one for students; they preferred to figure things out on their own and avoided asking for help.

In regards to the classroom experiences, there were distinct differences in the ways students described their academic experiences depending upon their college major. While students overall described Penn as an academically “competitive” environment, students in the Wharton School of Business perceived that environment as significantly more competitive than the other colleges, with few opportunities to engage in meaningful academic interactions with peers in the classroom. This lack of collaboration between students contributed to feelings of isolation within the academic realm of students’ experiences.

Finally, students described the nature of their interactions with faculty and staff on campus. For the most part, students’ interactions with faculty occurred as structured interactions with course professors, advisors, or supervisors. In this sense, faculty members served as professional role models or experts in the field who exposed students to ways of conducting research. When faculty took an active role in their education, students took it as an affirmation of their ability to do well in that particular area. Conversely, staff members were more often viewed as important resources and key members of students’ on-campus support system. Interactions with staff were also structured in nature, but overtime students and staff members cultivated meaningful

relationships. These staff members shared strategies for academic success, checked in frequently on them, and forwarded them information about academic resources and opportunities for personal and professional development.

***Research Question #2: How do African American, first generation college students describe their social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?***

Students described their social experiences attending the University of Pennsylvania in light of their precollege social experiences with peers, their opportunities for campus engagement through participation in clubs and organizations, and in comparison to their experiences within their home communities. First, students were high achievers during elementary, middle, and high school and at times had difficulty forging relationships with their pre-college peers because they were perceived as the “smart Black girl.” These experiences shaped their expectations for social engagement as college students. Each participant took advantage of some of the opportunities to socially engage with diverse groups of potential Penn students through scheduled visits to campus and attendance at summer bridge programs. These experiences led to the expectation that they would be able to cultivate meaningful peer relationships with their fellow students on campus, both within and across racial backgrounds.

Students also described the opportunities for campus engagement, acknowledging the diversity in the types of clubs and opportunities students could get involved in, and described Penn as a place where there was some sort of activity for everyone, academically, socially, or pre-professionally. Students were selective in the types of organizations they engaged in, citing the need not to overextend themselves given the demands of their academic load. In general, participants were able to socially find a

“like-type” community on campus with a diverse array of individuals who shared similar interests and values. These communities were found through informal interactions with peers and upper-class students, living in the African American themed dormitory, and through membership in campus organizations. While most organizations were described as open to everyone, there was some recognition that a few of the more exclusive organizations such as Greek Letter organizations and Honor Societies on campus invited members who “fit their profile” to participate, leaving those who did not out. Engaging socially was their attempt to combat early feelings of isolation and alienation and cultivate a sense of belonging within the campus community.

Finally, students described the campus social environment in comparison to their home communities, highlighting the perceived differences in the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic background of members of the campus community. Students shared how at times the campus environment fell short from meeting their expectations particularly when it came to interacting with White peers. These interactions were at times difficult to navigate. While students overall felt that the campus was diverse enough to reflect the experiences of students like themselves, students who are African American, first generation colleges students, sometimes Penn felt like a completely “different world” from the ones in which they were raised.

***Research Question #3: How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence?***

Students identified the barriers to college persistence as not having adequate financial resources, not having a strong support system, and losing self-confidence in one’s ability to succeed when faced with academic or social challenges. Students

described several of the strategies they personally used to mitigating these potential barriers to persistence. First, students talked about their prior knowledge about the financial aid policies of selective college and universities. Awareness of these policies made them comfortable with applying to these high-price institutions, despite having modest financial resources. The financial aid awards offered to them through the university minimized their out of pocket expenses for tuition and fees, making it possible for them to remain continuously enrolled. However, students also discussed the need to work in order to take care of personal expenses and as a way of gaining professional experience. Working an average of 15 hours per week at times put strain on students' schedule and ability to focus on their academic responsibilities or participate in social activities.

Students also named various individuals as members of their personal support system including their parents, siblings, campus peers, and Penn staff members. Students reported having consistent support from members of their family, especially from their parents and siblings before and throughout their college enrollment. Once students entered college, they began cultivating a support system through peers and staff members on campus. Peer relationships were in the forms of mentoring relationships with upper-class students, close friendships, and professional networks with students with similar interests. Staff members were viewed as important sources of support due to their sustained and consistent interest in their lives. These support networks were credited as being critical for students to successfully navigate the academic and social spaces on campus.

Despite encountering several challenges throughout their college careers, students described the importance of being “resilient” and maintaining a positive attitude regarding their ability to succeed in order to persist in college. Students exhibited resiliency by engaging in positive self-reflection, adapting their academic behaviors to maximize opportunities for success, and seeking out support from their various networks. Although one student seriously considered transferring out of Penn after her first year, all students talked about the short-term and long-term benefits of attending the University of Pennsylvania in terms of their own personal growth, opportunities for networking and professional development, and exposure to the world.

Taken together, through the expansion and acquisition of social and cultural capital, students were able to learn various strategies for navigating the academic and social realms of the campus environment. They discussed this as a value added approach, and did not express concern about losing their personal values in order to adapt to the campus environment. Through their experiences as a student at the University of Pennsylvania, students gained knowledge and information about what is necessary for success, gained access to opportunities for professional development, and gain a new perspective on themselves and the world around them.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Based upon the findings of these studies, four major contributions are highlighted which build upon the body of research on the collegiate experiences of African American students, first generation college students, and selective institutions of higher education. The major areas of contribution are: 1) intersectionality as a framework for understanding the experiences of individuals in college; 2) the link between families and college

persistence; 3) acknowledging how academic disciplines contribute to college persistence patterns; and 3) campus climate for diversity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I discuss each of these areas next.

**Intersectionality.** The complexity in the ways that students described their experience demonstrates that in order to gain a holistic understanding of college students' experiences, an intersectional approach can be helpful. Intersectionality is a concept used to explore how social identities operate together and simultaneously structures the experiences of individuals (Crenshaw, 1991; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Shields, 2008). Participants specifically described how their race, class, academic sense of self, gender, and spirituality, influenced how they perceived themselves and their environment and consequently shaped the ways they engaged with the campus environment. As a result, the expression of each student's identity played out differently depending on the context of her interactions with others (e.g. academic settings versus social settings, on-campus versus off-campus). For example, this study found that students' race and academic ability emerged as essential components of their identity, influencing their college choice process, strategies for engagement within the campus context, and experiences within their specified major. In fact, the ways students described themselves often emphasized the importance of their academic sense of self, a dimension that is often not explored as an isolated social identity. This study suggests that this aspect of identity must be taken into consideration when working with students attending selective institutions of higher education, as these individuals are often academic high achievers through high school. Further research in this area can explore the collegiate experiences of students who

identify similarly in terms of their academic sense of self, and compare and contrast their experiences across other dimensions of their identity.

Consistent with previous studies, participants' gender identity influenced their academic and social experiences prior-to and throughout their college experience (Allan & Madden, 2006; Fleming, 1984; Jackson, 1998; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a). Participants described their upbringing and parental expectations, as well as their sense of responsibility within their family as daughters and sisters to be a good role model and dispel negative stereotypes that could potentially derail them from achieving their goals. These ideas and messages were internalized and carried over into their college experience. Given trends in college enrollment and degree attainment which show that African American women continue to outpace African American men in high education, these findings suggest that gender identity is an important social identity to explore when interested in understanding the experiences and persistence patterns of students in higher education. Unfortunately, knowing that African American women are outpacing men has been the rationale for not focusing on this population. As a result of this view, studies that explore gender and race within high education tend to focus on the experiences of African American men, rendering the experiences of Black women relatively invisible.

An intersectional approach to understanding college students' experience focuses primarily on students' own understanding of their identity and experiences of difference, the influence of the multiple dimensions of identity on an evolving sense of self, and on the ways context shape experiences and perceptions of the environment (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones & McEwen, 2000). The findings of this study illustrate the complexity of students' experiences and how focusing in on any one (or two) dimensions of a students' identity



may make it difficult to understand the nuances of their college experiences. Recently, intersectional research in higher education has begun to investigate the differences within the Black college student population, noting that there is diversity in the ways students identify, for example in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, religion, or sexual identity. Celious and Oyserman's (2001) exploration of a *heterogeneous racial group perspective* for studying race "highlights the need for investigators to recognize distinctions among people in the same racial group" (p. 150). They specifically investigate the within-group diversity in the experiences of African Americans as it relates to gender, socioeconomic status, and physical attributes. Building upon this model, Harper and Nichols (2008) use a heterogeneous perspective to better understand the diversity of the experiences of Black men attending private, Predominantly White institutions. Most recently, Strayhorn's (2013) edited volume continues the investigation of within-group experiences of Black college students, exploring the ways students personally connect with their identity and how the various aspects of students' identity influence their educational aspirations, perceptions of the campus environment and experiences within institutions of higher education. With the intentional focus on the selective institutional context, this study adds to this growing line of research, adding the perspective of African American first generation college women and how their social identities shape their college experiences.

**The Link between Families and College Persistence.** As students enumerated the potential barriers to college persistence that they experienced as they navigated the educational pipeline, they described the ways their support system motivated them and provided them with the resources necessary to actualize their goals. Participants talked at

length about the support they received from their parents and siblings from the time they were in elementary school to the present as college juniors and seniors. These individuals, who had little personal experience with higher education, served as a source of motivation and encouragement for students to persist in college. During their formative years, parents nurtured students' academic skills and academic sense of self by encouraging high achievement and structuring opportunities for their exposure to college preparatory activities (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). Furthermore, parents attempted to shield their children from potential stressors (e.g. neighborhood violence, drug activity, poverty) that could distract or derail them from their academic pursuits. This was critical, given that each participant recognized that their neighborhoods did not offer many examples of success (Charles et al., 2004; Johnson, 2010; Massey et al., 2006).

Previous research on the relationship between family and first generation, African American college students reveal contradictory patterns. Studies have found that parents of first generation and African American college students are not as informed of the college choice process, and consequently are less likely to stress strong academic performance as a way of getting to college (Choy, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Studies of parents of African American high achievers, however, have found that these parents are deliberate in their strategies to foster academic achievement for their children (Conley, 2005; Guiffrida, 2005; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Consistent with these findings, the parents of the students in this study actively directed their children's educational opportunities through their own connections or through connections with school personnel, despite

their first generation status and limited personal experience with college. Gutman and McLoyd's (2000) study of low-income African American families revealed that the parents of high achievers were specific in their strategies to support education and had supportive conversations with their children about education and college going. This included parents frequently initiating contact with the school, establishing relationships with school officials, and being actively involved in the extracurricular experiences of their children. Highlighting the importance of positive relationships between home and school, Perna and Titus (2005) found that the structural constraints and limited resources available within the child's school shape parent-school interactions. Although the resources available within each participant's K12 school settings were limited and varied across participants, parents attempted to maximize access to these resources and also found outside supports through sending students to precollege preparatory programs, cultivating high achievers in the process. These findings speak to the importance of continued collaboration between students, parents, and schools in order to maximize opportunities for educational success for all students in general, but disadvantaged students in particular. Previous studies have also found that family members of first generation and minority college students can have a negative influence on college persistence (Engle et al., 2006; London, 1992; Winkle-Wagner, 2009a). The students in this study, however described the ways their family served as a bridge between their neighborhood and campus, and were continuously supportive and proud of their accomplishments to date.

Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure posits that to increase the likelihood of postsecondary persistence, students must break away from previous connections from

their home community in order to fully integrate academically and socially with the campus community. This theory has been criticized, however, for its limited applicability for minority students attending predominantly White institutions where the campus culture may be drastically different from that of their home community (Cabrera et al., 1999; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Tierney, 1992). Students in Guiffrida's (2005) study of high achieving African Americans attending a private PWI described several ways in which their families lent them emotional support while in college through verbal praise and encouragement or through cards and emails. Parents also served as academic counselors when participants needed someone to talk to about poor performance in a class or when making career and course decisions. Although parents didn't have all of the answers, students talked about the importance of being able to talk out their ideas, fears, hopes and dreams with them. Consistent with the findings of this study, students in Guiffrida's study, each student perceived their families as important sources of support during their college experience. This suggests that families have the potential to play a vital role in the college persistence of African American, first generation college students. By limiting students' awareness of neighborhood stressors, strategic relationships with knowledgeable school personnel, and providing continued support and encouragement to participants during their college years, parents provided students with the foundation and the ongoing support necessary to successfully navigate the educational pipeline.

**Academic Disciplines and College Persistence.** Students selected their majors prior to college, linking these choices to the personal interests and professional aspirations they had cultivated while in high school. They entered college with expectations that Penn would be academically rigorous and that their fellow students

would be highly intelligent. While these expectations met the reality of their experiences, analysis of the ways participants described the campus's academic environment and their academic experiences with peers and faculty point to the distinctions in experiences across academic disciplines. Nursing was described as a small, close-knit environment where there were structured opportunities to interact with academic support staff and faculty advisors. Conversely, within the Wharton School of Business, students felt there were few opportunities to engage with faculty and that the competitive nature of courses constrained peer collaboration. These findings highlight the existence of academic sub-communities on campus illustrating how one's academic major shapes their opportunities for academic and social engagement (Tinto, 1992).

One of the most significant factors related to persistence in a particular major is students' ability to succeed in "gateway courses" such as mathematics or introductory chemistry during their freshman year (Seymour & Hewitt, 1997). Each student shared that they immediately noticed the differences between their academic preparation in math and science and the expectations of their college courses. This was most significant for Patrice and Robin given their majors had several math and science course requirements within their first two years of study. Charles and associates (2009) investigated the link between the course taking patterns to the academic performance of students and their overall college persistence. They found that the first two year of courses taken within a given major carried important implications for grades earned due to differences in academic grading standards across programs and departments. Students who did not make these initial academic expectations were likely to change their major, take longer to graduate, or dropout of college. This is particularly problematic, given they also found

that Black students attending selective institutions were the least likely group to seek out the academic supports available on campus (Charles et al., 2009).

While adjusting to the academic rigor of college, in the classroom, students described the need to prove themselves academically to their peers and described the behaviors they engaged in to demonstrate to their professors and others that they were serious about their education (Davis et al., 2004). This proving process was particularly problematic for group work activities and became a source of stress for students (Jackson, 1998). This stress was markedly different within the competitive academic environment of Wharton, where students shared how they were less likely to engage with peers (who were not already their friends) for assignments, in part because their grade was tied to the performance of the class.

As minority students attending a PWI, they each had their own experiences with the “lack of presence” barrier associated with the absence of minorities in the curriculum and experiencing an institutional culture that “marginalized, devalued, and omitted ethnic minority students” (Padilla, et al., 1997, p. 131). Allan (2006) found that women in male dominated majors (e.g. engineering and accounting) were more likely to experience a “chilly” academic environment compared to students in female dominated majors (e.g. nursing and education) due to professors’ reliance on gendered teaching approaches that favored competition over collaboration. Cabrera and associates (2002) found that exposure to collaborative practices not only benefit minority students such as those in this study, but have added value to the educational experiences of all students in the academic setting. Collaborative learning practices “harness the ability and motivation of students towards their personal development, understanding of science and technology,

appreciation for art, analytic skills gain, and openness to diversity” (Cabrera et al., 2002 p. 29). Fortunately, opportunities to work with female faculty members in their major minimized these feelings within the classroom and gave students experience with the techniques in the field and fostered interest in pursuing academic careers (Astin, 1993; Seymour & Hewitt, 1997; Tinto, 1993). Students also talked about the importance of being involved in their college-specific student organizations that served as a network for professional resources such as internship and permanent career opportunities.

Understanding the academic expectations of a specific discipline can have implications for institutional interventions for student persistence. Alysha, Leila, Patrice, Robin, and Tatiana each had slightly different experiences within their field of study that shaped their strategies for persistence. While each student in this study is currently persisting and continuing in the major they initially selected, both Alysha and Tatiana questioned their decisions to pursue a major in Wharton. They shared their sense of frustration with their academic experiences, and Alysha at one point considered changing her major so that she could have a better GPA. Robin expressed the concern that she had to do well each semester, or risk having to take an additional semester or two to graduate. Continued studies within various academic disciplines can shed greater light on the experiences of students within these majors, the potential policies and practices within a particular major that inhibit persistence, and would lead to the enacting of interventions to promote the academic success of all students.

**Campus Climate for Diversity.** Previous studies have highlighted the ways that African American students feel outnumbered, isolated, and alienated from the majority White student body at PWIs, contributing to a campus racial climate that was perceived

to be “chilly” or toxic (Allen, 1992; Davis et al., 2004; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Solórzano et al., 2007). Students in this study, however, shared few examples of times when they felt isolated or alienated on campus and were clear to make distinctions between feelings of academic isolation versus social isolation. Students in the Wharton School of Business, for example talked about being academically isolated from their non-minority peers and described the difficulty or “awkwardness” associated with working with White students to complete group projects or study for classes. To combat this, students would often seek out opportunities to work with other African American students or cultivated working relationships with White students with whom they had previous contact. Socially, perceptions of isolation and alienation were oftentimes experienced within the first year of college, as students attempted to navigate the social realms of campus. With time, students engaged in multiple connections with peers that served to mitigate feelings of isolation or alienation on campus.

In college, high achieving students may face “black achiever isolation,” where in addition to experiencing isolation as a minority student attending a predominantly White institution, they also encounter similar experiences of isolation from other Black college students due to their academic ability (Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1998). The students in this study, however, talked about how attending Penn was their first experience in an environment where the majority of African American students were heavily invested in their academic success. In this sense, they were not perceived as “different” from other members of the Black community on campus, and did not experience “black achiever isolation.” The Black community at Penn served as a safe space for students to work with one another, both academically and socially, and helped students explore their racial



identity throughout college. Following Cross's (1991) theory of psychological "nigrescence" or the "process of becoming Black" four of the five students in this study experienced a process of expanding and modifying their black identity through interactions with members of the campus community during their time at Penn.

Penn's location within in the urban, predominantly African American community of West Philadelphia also seems to have tempered perceptions of a chilly campus racial climate. With the exception of one student, participants were raised in predominantly African American neighborhoods and attended predominantly African American schools kindergarten through the twelfth grade. Although members of the campus community were predominantly White, participants talked about ways they could connect with the larger and more diverse community through volunteering or visiting local restaurants and shops. Having family members only a cellphone call away also shielded students from experiencing too much isolation on campus, particularly during their first year. These findings suggest that at Penn, there is a positive perception of the campus racial climate for African American college students.

### **Study Implications**

Based upon the rich data provided through demographic surveys and individual interviews, this study's findings reveal important implications for theory, policy, and practice. These implications are intended to address the needs of African American, first generation college students within the context of selective colleges and universities.

**Theoretical Implications.** Several theories of college student retention inform policies and practices used to improve college persistence for African American and first generation college students (Astin, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera et al., 2005;

Padilla et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993). The findings from this study support previous theories, highlighting the relationship between college persistence and pre-college academic performance (Astin, 1993; Perna, 2005), availability of financial resources (Cabrera et al., 1992; McDonough & Calderone, 2009), and campus social integration (Fischer, 2007; Padilla et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993). The findings from this study also suggest that there are gaps in the literature as it relates to the experiences of high achieving students. High achieving students are most likely to persist in college across institution types and demographic backgrounds (Charles et al., 2009). Yet college retention models spend little attention on exploring the college *experiences* of high achieving students across socioeconomic backgrounds, race, and gender. The findings from this study suggest that high achieving students spend a tremendous amount of time and energy meeting the academic demands of higher education. Exploring to what extent this academic focus takes away from opportunities to explore the social and pre-professional resources available within the college setting has the potential to expand our understanding of this population. Additionally, for the students in this study, their socioeconomic status did not hamper their intentions to attend college nor their choice to attend a selective, high price university. This suggests that the intersection between students' socioeconomic status and their academic sense of self leads to behaviors that are not adequately explained by traditional college choice and retention models. A more intersectional approach to these models can provide a more nuanced understanding of the college persistence patterns of individuals across various social identities.

While general models can be helpful for delineating some of the large-scale retention issues, the diversity of educational institutions calls for the need for campus

specific models (Tinto, 1993). Padilla et al.'s (1997) local model of minority student success offers a useful framework for understanding how being a minority student attending a predominantly White institution influences the strategies used to mitigate barriers to student persistence. The strategies used by students in this study to navigate the academic and social spaces within the University of Pennsylvania mirror those utilized by individuals in Padilla's model. Through interactions with knowledgeable others on campus, participants in this study gained the heuristic (campus specific) knowledge necessary for success within this setting, including information about academic resources, membership in campus organizations, relationships with campus staff and peers, and support through the university's financial aid policies. This study adds to this model by demonstrating its applicability within a divergent institutional context (private, selective versus public, open access in original model), and through examining the experiences of upper-class students instead of second year students in the original model. With a better understanding the campus specific knowledge necessary to mitigate barriers to persistence, institutions can be more intentional in their efforts to transmit this knowledge formally and informally to new and continuing students through faculty, staff, and upper-classmen.

**Implications for Policy and Practice.** In order to promote college persistence for African American, first generation college students, it is important that school and campus administrators, as well as key policymakers have a greater understanding of the academic and social experiences of this population as they navigate the educational pipeline.

*Implications for families.* The families of the participants in this study were highly involved in their educational experiences from the time they were young children. Parents were instrumental in cultivating these high achievers academic sense of self and were supportive of their development of high personal and professional aspirations that could only be achieved through college completion. Even with limited personal experience with higher education, parents worked to ensure that their children had access to information and experiences that would provide them with the knowledge and confidence necessary to navigate the educational pipeline. This was oftentimes accomplished through partnerships with knowledgeable others who were more familiar with the college process. These findings suggest that parents could potentially benefit from structured opportunities to engage with schools, pre-college access programs, and colleges through targeted programming efforts. These efforts must be initiated early in a students' academic career before students are tracked away from courses that could prepare them for college such as courses in upper-level math and science. Moreover, these sessions when facilitated by college officials could help with the the flow of information about the college choice process, and financial aid, as well as relevant campus specific information about particular institutions' policies and practices that could have a lasting impact on their children outcomes. These programming efforts should also continue for parents once their children enroll in college so that they can continue to be informed and involved in the college experience. This can help to bridge the gap between the experiences of students and their families. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have shown that involving parents increases likelihood of

student's successful degree completion (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

***Implications for K12 education.*** The findings from this study reveal that college success begins in elementary school. Students who are interested in pursuing higher education must be put on the path towards academic success early (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). While scholars have identified that most students begin to formulate college-going aspirations by the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, this may be too late for students who could be tracked into academic programs that steer them away from college preparatory education (Perna, 2006). Moreover, potential first generation college students who are not being adequately supported by their schools, or who attend poorly resourced schools should be encouraged to seek out structured local or federally funded outreach programs such as TRIO Upward Bound or TRIO Talent Search to gain the academic support and guidance necessary for college enrollment and persistence (Perna & Swail, 2002). These programs should encourage rigorous academic preparation and structure opportunities for students, and their families to gain information about the college choice process through information sessions about the application process, financial aid options, and college visits. Information about ways to finance college can prompt behaviors linked to college enrollment and encourage students to expand their choice set to include institutions where the likelihood that they will persist to degree completion are the greatest. It is important that these educational endeavors involved family members, as this study demonstrates that parents and siblings are influential during the college choice process.

***Implications for academic support.*** So much of the academic underperformance of African American students can be traced to the negative perceptions and stereotypes

surrounding their academic ability (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; 2006; Massey et. al, 2006; Steele & Aronson, 1995). It is crucially important for campuses to address the actual and not the perceived academic needs of students from traditionally marginalized groups, including African American and first generation college students. The reluctance of the high achieving students in this study to seek out campus academic support is consistent with previous studies that found that seeking out institutional help overall is low for students attending selective universities (Charles et al., 2009). When interventions are based on race or class status and the perception is that these individuals *need* special support systems, interventions negatively impact the performance of otherwise high achieving scholars (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Chang et al., 2005). Therefore it is recommended that such interventions should target the “at-risk” courses not students labeled as “at risk,” and should be delivered in ways that are not perceived to be “remedial” but is integral to students’ continued academic success.

***Implications for social support networks.*** Previous research has highlighted the positive implications of living on-campus for opportunities for academic and social engagement as well as college persistence (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Consistent with these findings, students talked about the benefits of living in Dubois College House, the only African-American themed house on campus, describing it as a community or family and was a place where they were able to connect with peers both socially and academically. More housing options like this could be beneficial for students looking for a sense of community on campus. Likewise, institutions should continue to foster programs that celebrate diversity such as the Multicultural Scholars Program and summer bridge programs that can bring students from diverse backgrounds

to campus early to allow them an opportunity to gain early exposure to the campus environment.

### **Directions for Future Research**

**Diversity of African American College Experiences.** This study illustrates the importance of expanding our understanding of how race, academic ability and institutional setting influence the academic and social experience of first generation, African American college students. Too few studies attempt to describe and explain how within-group differences impact students' interactions, relationships and experiences in college (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013). The findings from this study support recent literature investigating the diversity within the African American community. Previous scholars have demonstrated that within the Black college student population, there is great variation in the ways students identify in terms of their race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and religion. Consequently, they suggest that research concerning Black college students should explicitly explore the ways that students connect with their identity (Stewart, 2013; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2013), and the ways various aspects of students' identity influence their educational aspirations (Strayhorn, 2013), perceptions of the campus environment (Brown & Jayakumar, 2013), and experiences within institutions of higher education (Fries-Britt, Johnson, & Burt, 2013; Griffin & Perez, 2013). Using an intersectional perspective, future studies can explore students' experiences by race, gender, and class. An intersectional perspective allows for the examination of power dynamics that exist within the campus environment, as well as the ways the various social identities of Black

women are expressed differentially depending upon contextual factors (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Shields, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013).

**Selective Institutions and Perceptions of Class.** Given the setting of this study, findings reveal a gap in the persistence and retention literature when it comes to college experiences by class. Highly selective colleges and universities boast a considerably high graduation rate, studies have shown that students from lower-class backgrounds are less satisfied with their college experience as compared to their more affluent peers (Aries & Seider, 2005; Walpole, 2008). Few studies specifically explore the concepts of class and class-consciousness within educational settings. This study shows that while students were able to find connections within peers within their racial group they were also aware of socioeconomic differences across campus which impacted their experiences as well. Future research should explore how class status and the perceptions of class can shape students' college experiences and satisfaction with college.

**Women in Higher Education.** Within the African American college student population, women are overrepresented in comparison to men, setting up an unbalanced gender ratio that influences both the academic and social spaces on campus. The growing gap in college enrollment between African American women and African American men has led researchers to focus their scholarship on gender differences in the collegiate experience (Bonner, 2001; Harper, 2006; Jackson, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These studies generally pay greater attention to the experiences of Black men, citing the need to improve access and success for this population that has lagged due to a myriad of educational, social and economic factors. Consequently, while the numbers of African American women pursuing postsecondary



opportunity continues to grow, few scholars choose to dedicate their work on exploring the academic and social experiences of this population (Watt, 2006; Zambrana & MacDonald, 2009). This skewed research preference for males over females renders the collegiate experiences of Black women relatively invisible. Studies that specifically explore the college experiences of African American women that take into consideration the intersections of their social identities can fill this void and can provide institutional leadership with information that can facilitate college access and persistence and further enhance the experiences of this population on campus.

### **Study Limitations**

Case study allows for the investigation of complex and multiple variables that have the potential of adding to the development of a holistic description of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2009). Case study, however, is not without its limitations. First, the case study must be delimited by a bounded system. This study explores the experiences of a unique population within a specific context, thus limiting the generalizability of findings to a different population or institution. This study explored the academic and social experiences of African American, first generation college students attending the University of Pennsylvania, a private, selective, predominantly White institution. The findings of this study are not generalizable to all African American, first generation college students, or even to all students attending a private, selective PWI. However, as in qualitative research, the intent is not to generalize, but to learn from a particular case. It is dependent upon the reader to glean which conclusions are applicable to any given setting. It is my intent that this study provides a richer perspective of the experiences of African American, first generation

college students attending a selective university and the factors that they perceive as being critical to their success in higher education. Another limitation of the study is that it captures the experiences of a small group of African American women on campus. The focus small sample size however, was purposeful, and by exploring the experiences of just African American women, we learn about their perspectives without the need of contrasting experiences across gendered perspectives (Shields, 2008). Finally, this study examined students' experiences as college juniors and seniors and required students reflect upon their precollege experiences and early experiences at Penn. Their perceptions and recollections of experiences at the time of their interviews may differ from their perceptions in the moment in which they occurred (Merriam, 2009). Despite this limitation, there are few studies that explicitly target upper-class students to gauge their understandings of their collegiate experiences.

## **Conclusions**

As African Americans continue to be underrepresented in college enrollment and degree attainment, it is important to understand not only their academic and social experiences in college, but how they have successfully overcome the various barriers to educational attainment. The increasing numbers of African Americans entering and succeeding in an array of different institutional contexts provides a perfect opportunity to explore the educational experiences of this population via qualitative methods. This study adds value to the existing body of research for several reasons.

First, the emphasis on selective institutions differentiates this study from those on minority students at PWIs, and thus allows for a greater understanding of this specific institutional context, and how minority students experience these environments. Second,

by focusing on juniors and seniors who are persisting in college, it allows for an exploration of the academic and social experiences of students, moving beyond previous studies that primarily focus on issues of access or the transition from high school to college. Finally, the intersectional nature of the research allows a more complex examination of the competing identities of race, class, gender and academic ability within the context of a selective institution of higher education where the campus norms were based upon white, middle/upper class values.

This study also has implications for policy and practice. These findings can aid institutional leaders when making decisions as to how to foster the college persistence and enhance the overall experiences of first generation, low-income and minority students on their campus. Moreover, this study may also serve as an example of how qualitative research can enhance institutional statistical data to extend our understanding of trends occurring within a particular institutional context.

## **Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email**

July 9, 2012

Dear Potential Participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation study! The goal of my research is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African American students who attend selective colleges and universities and are one of the first in their family (first generation) to attend and complete college. I am particularly interested in the factors that lead to college persistence and degree completion. If you are a first generation college student enrolled in a selective college/university, as a junior or senior, and self-identify as African American or Black, then you may be eligible to participate!

For this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire, and participate in two individual interviews, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each. I will ask questions during the interview which will allow me to learn about your academic and social experiences during your collegiate career and your perceptions of the factors that have contributed to your persistence at your institution. Although my preference is to conduct interviews on your campus, I can arrange to interview you via webcast or over the phone at a time that is convenient for you. The second interview will take place no later than four weeks after the first interview.

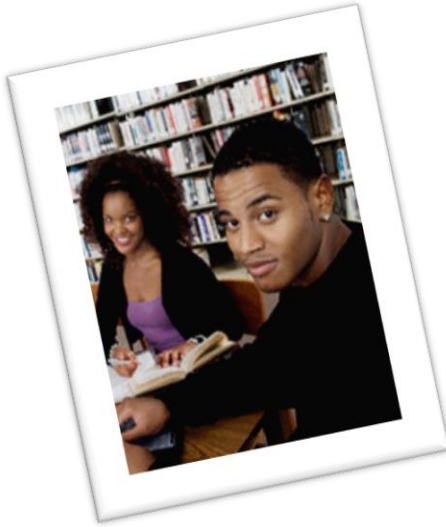
With your permission, all interviews will be digitally recorded, however the data will remain confidential and used only for research purposes. After 10 years all original data will be destroyed as required by the institutional research board. In addition, as a participant, you will be asked to select a pseudonym in order to maintain personal confidentiality in all reports of the findings.

If you are interested in participating in this study, simply complete this [Eligibility Survey](#) or contact me at [jennifmj@umd.edu](mailto:jennifmj@umd.edu). Your participation is appreciated and important to the success of this research study. Please see that attached flier for more information. If you have any additional questions about this study, please feel free contact my project advisor, Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt, at [sfries@umd.edu](mailto:sfries@umd.edu).

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Johnson  
PhD Candidate, Higher Education  
College of Education  
University of Maryland, College Park

## Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flier



### **A Different World: Dissertation Research Project**

*The goal of this project is to learn about the factors that contribute to the persistence of African American first-generation college students at selective colleges and universities.*

#### **Why me?**

Are you a first-generation college student attending a selective university? Do you self-identify as African American or Black? Are you a junior or senior? If so, I invite you to take part in a research project to explore the complex and unique experiences of African American college students attending selective colleges and

universities.

#### **What would be asked of me?**

You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and participate in two audio-taped 60-90 minute individual interviews. You will have the opportunity to share your college experience and your perception of the factors that have impacted your persistence in college. If you decide to change your mind and cancel the interview you can do so at any time. All information will be kept confidential and we will not be using your name.



#### **Where can I get more information?**

If you would like additional information, please contact:

Jennifer M. Johnson  
PhD Candidate  
College of Education  
3214 Benjamin Building  
University of Maryland  
[jennifmj@umd.edu](mailto:jennifmj@umd.edu)

Sharon Fries-Britt  
Associate Professor  
College of Education  
2203 Benjamin Building  
University of Maryland  
[sfries@umd.edu](mailto:sfries@umd.edu)

## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Project Title	A Different World: First Generation African American Students at a Selective University
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt, Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park and Ms. Jennifer Johnson, doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to take part in this research project because you have self-identified as an African American student attending a selective university and as a student whose parents have not earned a bachelors' degree, making you a first generation college student. The purpose of this research project is to learn about the factors that contribute to the college persistence of first generation African American college students attending selective colleges and universities.
Procedures	First, you will be asked to complete a demographic survey to gain background information about you and your educational experiences. Then, you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews that will last approximately 60-90 minutes each. You will be asked questions about your academic and social experiences as a student. Specifically, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences on issues of race and class and the ways these issues shape your college experience. Examples of questions that will be asked include – How would you describe yourself as an elementary school student? What were your initial impressions of your college? And What are your overall impressions of the campus environment for African American students? Each individual interview will be audio-taped and transcribed and the electronic audio files will remain saved as password-protected files on Ms. Johnson's computer once they are transcribed.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project. You will not be asked to engage in any physical activity. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. The nature of this research will focus on your perspectives and opinions about your experiences as a student. You are in control of what you want to share.
Potential Benefits	There will be no direct benefits to you from this research. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the factors that contribute to the collegiate success of first generation Black students who attend selective colleges and universities.

Confidentiality	<p>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized. To protect your identity, you will be able to select a pseudonym for this project. If you do not select a pseudonym, one will be created for you. Your true name, contact information or other identifying information will not be linked in any way to your audio files and transcripts. Your contact information will only be maintained to follow-up for your second interview, and will be saved as a separate file with the student investigator, Ms. Johnson, in her home office.</p> <p>Access to contact information, audio files and transcriptions will be limited to Dr. Fries-Britt and Ms. Johnson. Contact information, electronic audio files and transcription records will be deleted/destroyed once the research is completed and a hard-copy of transcripts will be retained with the principal investigator, Ms. Johnson, in her home office.</p> <p>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. The data you provide will be reported using a pseudonym. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>
Medical Treatment	<p>The University of Maryland does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will the University of Maryland provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.</p>
Right to Withdraw and Questions	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the principal investigator, Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt at 2203 Benjamin Building, University of Maryland, College Park, 20742. Or by phone at 301-405-0168 or <a href="mailto:sfries@umd.edu">sfries@umd.edu</a>.</p>
Participant Rights	<p>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a> Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p>This research has been reviewed according to the University of</p>

	Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.	
Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.	
	If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.	
Signature and Date	PARTICIPANT NAME [Please Print]	
	PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE	
	DATE	



## Appendix D: Participant Demographic Questionnaire

### African American Students at a Selective University

Dear participant, please complete this brief questionnaire by circling or completing the appropriate answers below. If you are uncomfortable sharing any parts of this information please leave the question blank.

1. What is your gender?      a) Male      b) Female      c) Transgendered Male  
d) Transgendered Female
2. What is your age?      \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your country of birth? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your mother/female guardian's country of birth?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your father/male guardian's country of birth?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you an International Student?      a) Yes      b) No
7. How do you identify racially and ethnically? (Select best fit)  
a) African American  
b) Black American (e.g. Ghanaian, Jamaican, Nigerian), please specify  
\_\_\_\_\_  
c) Multiracial, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
d) Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
e) I prefer not to respond
8. What was your mother/female guardian's highest level of education at the time of your admission into your undergraduate institution?  
a. Elementary school only      g. Bachelor's degree  
b. Junior high school only      h. Some graduate school  
c. Some high school      i. Master's degree  
d. High school diploma      j. J. D., Ph.D., or M.D.  
e. Some college      k. Unknown/Not Applicable  
f. Associates' degree
9. What is your mother/female guardian's current occupation?  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What was your father/male guardian's highest level of education at the time of your admission into your undergraduate institution?  
a. Elementary school only      b. Junior high school only

- |                        |                           |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| c. Some high school    | h. Some graduate school   |
| d. High school diploma | i. Master's degree        |
| e. Some college        | j. J.D., Ph.D., or M.D.   |
| f. Associates' degree  | k. Unknown/Not Applicable |
| g. Bachelor's degree   |                           |

11. What is your father/male guardian's current occupation?

---

12. Based upon your family income, how would you define your class status at the time of your admission into your undergraduate institution?

- a) Lower Class/Poor
- b) Working Class
- c) Middle Class
- d) Upper Class/Affluent

13. Are you eligible to receive the Federal Pell Grant? a) Yes b) No c) I do not know

High School Information

14. Have you taken any Advanced Placement courses?

- a) No
- b) Yes, please circle the course(s):
 

Biology	Calculus	Chemistry	English	French
U.S. Government	Spanish	Physics	Psychology	
Statistics	U.S. History	World History	Other: _____	

15. Did you participate in the International Baccalaureate Program (IB)?

- a) No
- b) Yes

16. Were you an active participant in any college preparatory programs? (e.g. Upward Bound, Talent Search)

- a) No
- b) Yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

College Information

17. Were you a participant in a college transition/bridge program? (e.g. POSSE, PennCap Pre-Freshmen Program)

- a. No
- b. Yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

18. What is your current class rank? (Select only one)

- a) Sophomore
- b) Junior
- c) Senior or beyond

17. What is your current student enrollment status: a) Part-Time b) Full-Time  
c) N/A

18. As of today, what is your cumulative Grade Point Average (4.00 scale)

\_\_\_\_\_

19. Please list your major(s)/program of study

\_\_\_\_\_

20. What are your intended career goals?

\_\_\_\_\_

21. Which statement best describes your work status *during the academic year*: (Select best fit)

a) Part time work less than 20 hours

b) Part time work more than 20 hours

c) Full time work

e) I do not work during the academic year

19. During the academic year, where do you work?

a) On campus

b) Off campus

c) I do not work during the academic year

For the purposes of this study, please select the pseudonym (first name) that you would like to use. [Note: A pseudonym can be any name you desire. If this is left blank, the researchers will create a pseudonym on your behalf] PSEUDONYM: \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU!!!

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## **Appendix E: Interview Protocol**

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

General Categories of Interest: precollege academic experiences, family role, perception of self, academic sense of self, classroom experiences, support networks, student involvement, racial climate, gender climate, class climate, general campus environment

Research Questions:

1. How do academically talented first generation African American students describe their academic and social experiences attending selective institutions of higher education?
2. Within the context of a selective college environment, what strategies do academically talented first generation African American students utilize to mitigate barriers to college persistence?

### First Interview

Introduction:

Thank you for being here today. As you know, I am a graduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park. My research focuses on experiences of first generation African American college students attending selective universities. My goal is to learn from the experiences of successful students such as yourself, as a way of helping to ensure that colleges and universities provide the support necessary for students like you to persist to degree completion. We will sit for two interviews. Each interview should last approximately 60-90 minutes. For this first interview, I will begin by asking you a few questions about your family, your early educational experiences, and your expectations for college. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To keep an accurate record of this session, may I have your permission to audio record your interview? (Turn on the recorder). If you have any questions as we go along, please feel free to stop me.

1<sup>st</sup> Interview Questions:

Family Background Questions:

1. Please tell me a little about your family [parents, siblings].
2. Have either of your parents attended college? Siblings attend college?
3. How does your family view education, the importance of education?
  - a. what expectations were set for you?
4. How has their view impacted the way you view education?
5. When you were young, what did you tell people you wanted to be when you grew up?

### K12 Experiences

6. Thinking about you precollege experiences. Tell me a little about your early educational experiences, from kindergarten – high school?
  - a. turning points? Memories of early educational experiences?
7. Did you remember particular things your family did to support you academically during those early years?
8. Were there any particular teachers/individuals make an impact on you during that time?
9. Did you participate in any college preparatory programs or activities?
10. How would you describe yourself as a student during elementary school? High school?
  - a. Were you “tracked” in specific courses as a student?
11. Please tell me a bit about the high school(s) you attended [demographic characteristics]
12. What were your high school experiences like academically? Socially?
13. What were your grades like in high school?
  - a. Were there any differences in the racial composition of the classes you attended?
14. What types of extracurricular activities were you involved in during high school?
15. When would you say you began to thinking about going to college?
16. What factors were you looking for when deciding which college to attend?
  - a. What role did finances play in your college application process?
  - b. What role did your family play in your college application process?
  - c. Who supported your during your college application process?
17. Why did you ultimately decide to enroll in your university?
18. Prior to enrolling, what did you expect it be like attending this institution? Where did those expectations come from?
  - a. Had you visited the campus prior to enrolling?
  - b. Do you know anyone who attends/has attended this institution?
19. Reflecting back on your first semester on campus, what were your initial impressions of the institution?

Conclusion:

Thank you for participating in this interview. I will transcribe this interview and I will forward you a copy of the themes that have come from our conversation today. That will also be an opportunity for you to clarify or elaborate on any of the topics we discussed.

In order to maintain confidentiality, you had the opportunity to select a pseudonym for me to use for this project. Are you satisfied with the name you indicated on your demographic questionnaire? If not, I can select a pseudonym on your behalf.

As you know, our second interview will focus on your academic and social experiences as a student at the University. That will be another opportunity for you to clarify or elaborate on any of the topics we discussed during your first interview. I will follow up via email to schedule a date and time for that interview, which will be held within the next four weeks. Thank you again, for your participation. I really appreciate your time.

## Second Interview

### Introduction:

Thank you again for being here today. This interview should last approximately 60-90 minutes. For this second interview, I will begin by asking you a few questions to follow up from our first interview. Next, we will talk about your academic and social experiences as a student at the University. We will conclude with some reflections on your overall college experiences. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To keep an accurate record of this session, may I have your permission to audio record your interview? (Turn on the recorder). If you have any questions as we go along, please feel free to stop me.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview Questions

#### Early College Impressions

1. How would you describe this campus?
2. Do you feel that there are many students here like you? In what ways? In what ways are they different?
3. Do you feel that your precollege experiences prepared you for the expectations of college? In what ways? [academically and socially]
  - a. Had you visited this/any college campus before?
  - b. Did you attend a summer bridge program? Orientation session?

#### Academic Experiences

4. Given your academic experiences in high school, how easy was it to be successful academically at this institution?
  - a. Were there specific courses you excelled in? Had difficulty in?
5. What types of things do you do to maintain good grades in your courses?
  - a. What adjustments have you made over the years academically?
6. What have your classroom experiences been like in your major?
7. Please describe your interactions with faculty, both in and outside of the classroom?
  - a. Do you notice any differences in the way various faculty members treat you? [by gender, race, age, discipline]

#### Social Experiences

8. What has it been like for you socially as an African American student on this campus?
  - a. In what ways do you feel connected to the campus?

- b. Have you experienced any circumstances where you felt that you could not be a part of some experiences on campus?
  - c. Have you ever experienced a negative incident on campus that you attributed to your identity (race/ethnicity, class, gender)? Are you aware of any?
9. Who do you feel you can turn to for support? [on campus/off campus]
  10. Have you developed a peer group on campus? [demographics of this group]
  11. How often do you return home to visit family and friends? What feelings do you experience while you are home?
  12. Have there been any moments when you felt that college was not for you and you should leave or transfer?

### Conclusion

13. Based on your experiences, what are the barriers to educational success for students like you? [note race/ethnicity, class, and gendered responses]
14. During your time here, have you personally encountered any specific barriers to your educational success?
  - a. How have you managed to overcome these barriers?
15. Throughout your college experiences here, what techniques or strategies have you used to navigate the educational environment? (e.g. campus policies, navigating the campus, identifying key people on campus)
16. How has attending this university changed you? [academically, as a first generation student, as a Black person]
17. What are your overall impressions of the campus environment for African American students?
18. Based on your experiences, what do you think it takes to be successful at this university?
19. What advice would you give campus administrators (staff, faculty) who are deciding how to best support first generation minority college students on this campus?
20. Is there anything else that you would like me to know about your experiences at this institution?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I will transcribe this interview and I will forward you a copy of the themes that have come from our conversation today. That will also be an opportunity for you to clarify or elaborate on any of the topics we discussed.

In order to maintain confidentiality, you had the opportunity to select a pseudonym for me to use for this project. Are you still satisfied with the name you indicated on your demographic questionnaire? If not, I can select a pseudonym on your behalf. Thank you again, for your participation. I really appreciate your time.

## Third Interview

### Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me again. This interview should last approximately 60-90 minutes. For this third interview, I will begin by asking you a few questions to follow up from our earlier interviews. Next, we will talk in detail a bit more about your academic and social experiences as a student at the University. We will conclude with some reflections on your overall college experiences. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To keep an accurate record of this session, may I have your permission to audio record your interview? (Turn on the recorder). If you have any questions as we go along, please feel free to stop me.

### 3rd Interview Questions

#### Followup Questions

*(specific to each participant)*

#### Academic Experiences

1. What types of things do you do to maintain good grades in your courses?
2. What have your classroom experiences been like in your major?
3. Please describe your interactions with faculty, both in and outside of the classroom? Do they maintain high expectations for you?
4. How important are finances in your ability to persist at this institution?
5. Throughout your college experiences here, what techniques or strategies did you use to navigate the educational environment? (e.g. campus policies, navigating the campus, identifying key people on campus)

#### Social Experiences

1. Please describe your interactions with your peers, both in and outside of the classroom?
2. Do you feel like there are other students “like you” on this campus that you can go to for support?
3. In what ways do you feel connected to the campus?
4. Are there any circumstances where you feel that you cannot be a part of some of the social experiences on campus?
5. Have you ever had a negative campus experience that you attribute to your social identity? (race/ethnicity, class, gender)
6. Do you know of any instances that happened on campus or to your peers?



## Family

1. What role did your family play in your decision to enroll here?
2. How often do you return home to visit family and friends? What feelings do you experience while you're home?
3. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience at this institution?

## **Appendix F: Observation Protocol**

### Observation Protocol

#### *Purpose of the Observations*

The purpose of my field observations is to observe collegians in a natural college setting. During participant observations, the researcher “carefully observes, systematically experiences, and consciously records in detail the many aspects of a situation” (Glesne, 2011). The participant observation also calls for the researcher to constantly analyze her observations for meaning and scrutinize her thoughts for potential bias (Glesne, 2011). This observation protocol is designed to assist in the data collection, interpretation and analysis of my field observations of participants.

#### *Role of the Researcher*

As researcher, I will assume the role of non-participant, or “complete observer role” (Adler & Adler, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). This means that as the researcher, I will not deliberately interact with members of the group. I will use the observation protocol to make descriptive notes of the settings, interpretive notes of the observed behaviors and interactions between individuals in the room, and record reflective notes commenting my thoughts and feelings during the session (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). Additional observation notes will be immediately recorded after the conclusion of the session.

#### *Categories for Field Notes*

##### A. Observations Related to the Research Questions

I will make note of comments and observed behaviors among students as well as between students and staff members relating to the following concepts:

- a. Race/Ethnicity
- b. Class status
- c. Academic Achievement
- d. Social Support
- e. Academic and Financial resources

##### B. Observations Related to the Setting and Environment

- a. Physical environment
- b. Students
- c. Parents
- d. Staff members/invited speakers

##### C. Observations Related to the Observed Interactions

- a. Perceptions of the impact of my presence on the setting
- b. Thoughts about the observations

##### D. Researcher’s Reactions

In a separate column, I will note my thoughts and reactions to comments or observed behavior throughout the session.

*Observation Protocol*

<i>Setting:</i>		
<i>Descriptive Notes</i>	<i>Interpretive Notes</i>	<i>Reflective Notes</i>

*Adapted from Creswell (2007)*

## Appendix G: List of Tables

**Table 2.1**

*Framework of the Study*

Models/Concepts	Elements Examined	Examples of Concepts of Interest
Astin's (1993) IEO College Impact Model	Inputs	Demographics (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, parent education) Precollege academic performance
	Environment	Institutional history Campus climate (race, class, gender) Classroom experiences (w/faculty; peers) Social experiences (w/peers)
	Outputs	Academic performance, student engagement Psychological sense of self Academic performance
Padilla's (1997) Local Model of Minority Student Success	Theoretical Knowledge	Academic performance
	Heuristic Knowledge Barriers: Transition from high school to college	Campus specific knowledge Campus climate (race, class, gender) Relationships with family
	Lack of nurturing	Relationships with peers; members of the campus community Self-efficacy
	Lack of presence	Structural Diversity Relationships with peers; members of the campus community
Cultural Capital	Tastes and Attitudes	Cultural knowledge Beliefs about higher education
Social Capital	Access to Networks	Relationships with members of the campus community

**Table 3.1***Sample of Interview Protocol*

Conceptual Framework	Interview Questions
Q1: Background and Precollege Questions	
Inputs: Race/ethnicity, gender, class	1. Please tell me a little about your family [parents, siblings].
Inputs: Race/ethnicity, gender, class	2. Have either of your parents attended college? Siblings attend college?
Inputs: Race/ethnicity, gender, class	3. How does your family view education, the importance of education?
Inputs: Academic Preparation	4. Were there any particular teachers/individuals that made an impact on you from kindergarten – high school?
Inputs: Academic Preparation	5. Did you participate in any college preparatory programs or activities?
Inputs: Academic Preparation	6. What were your high school experiences like academically? Socially?
Q2: How do African American, first generation college students describe their academic experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?	
Environment	7. Reflecting back to your first semester on campus, what were your initial impressions of the institution?
Environment	8. What have your classroom experiences been like in your major?
Outcomes	9. What types of things do you do to maintain good grades in your courses?
Environment	10. Please describe your interactions with faculty, both in and outside of the classroom?
Q3: How do African American, first generation college students describe their social experiences attending a selective institution of higher education?	
Environment	11. What has it been like for you socially as an African American student on this campus?
Environment	12. What types of activities and programs

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Outcomes	<p>have you been involved in?</p> <p>13. Have you ever had a negative campus experience anything that you attributed to your social identity? (race/ethnicity, class, gender) [followup – Do you know of any instances?]</p>
Input/Environment	<p>14. How often do you return home to visit family and friends? What feelings do you experience while you're home?</p>
Environment	<p>15. Do you feel there are others students "like-you" on this campus that you can go to for support?</p>
<p>Q4: How do African American, first generation college students mitigate barriers to college persistence?</p>	
Input/Environment	<p>16. Have there been any moments where you were you thought that this college was not for you and you should leave or transfer?</p>
Outcomes	<p>17. Throughout your college experiences here, what techniques or strategies did you use to navigate the educational environment? (e.g. campus policies, identifying key people on campus)</p>
Environment	<p>18. Throughout your college experience, what types of programs and services were most beneficial to you?</p>
Input/Environment/Outcomes	<p>19. How has attending this university changed you? [academic self; yourself as a first generation student, as a Black person]</p>
Environment/Outcomes	<p>20. Based on your experiences, what do you think it takes to be successful at this university?</p>

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**Table 3.2***Codebook Excerpt*

Code	Definition	Example Response
Parents	Reference to mother, father or guardian	“My mom and my dad don’t always agree about a lot of things, but one thing that my dad realizes, and lets my mom handle [is] education...”(Alysha)
Acad beh	Academic behaviors or strategies participants engaged in as college students.	“As I mentioned before coming here I really had to teach myself how to study. Um and even now I still don’t have a full sense of who I am as a studier...” (Tatiana)
Environment	Perceptions of the physical, academic, social, or racial campus environment.	“It’s very big, um but it’s a real campus. I would describe this campus as a real campus. All of our buildings are here and um you can see your friends around here...” (Patrice)
Involvement	Examples of collegiate involvement in academic, pre-professional or social organizations; employment	“Pretty much all my life I’ve been involved one way or the other with some sort of musical group...” (Robin)

**Table 4.1*****Participant Demographic Profile***

Participant	Status	Gender	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Mother's Education	Father's Education	Class Status
Alysha	Junior	Female	20	African American	Some college	High school	Middle Class
Leila	Junior	Female	19	African American	Some high school	High school	Lower Class
Patrice	Senior	Female	20	African American	None	None	Lower Class
Robin	Junior	Female	19	African American	Some college	Some college	Middle Class
Tatiana	Senior	Female	21	African American	High school	Some college	Working Class



**Table 4.2*****Participant Academic Profile***

Participant	Precollege Academic Honors	High school demographics	# of Advanced Placement Courses	Precollege Program?	College Major
Alysha	Elementary, middle & high school honors student	D/public	4	Yes	Marketing
Leila	Elementary salutatorian; high school valedictorian	PM/public	5	No	Communication
Patrice	Elementary valedictorian	PB/public	1	No	Chemistry
Robin	Elementary & high school valedictorian	PB/public charter	5	Yes	Nursing
Tatiana	Elementary & high school valedictorian	PM/public	2	No	Marketing

Note: D = diverse; PB = predominantly Black; PM = predominantly minority (non-White)

**Table 4.3*****Participants' On-Campus Profile***

Participant	Living Arrangements	Campus Involvement	Academic Programs	Student Worker
Alysha	On campus 3 years; DuBois 1 year	Pre-Professional; Social	PFP, Africana, PENNCAP	Yes
Leila	On campus 3 years	Pre-Professional	PFP, PENNCAP	Yes
Patrice	On campus 3 years; off campus 1 year; DuBois 1 year	Cultural; Pre-Professional	McNair	Yes
Robin	On campus 2 years; off campus 1 year; DuBois 1 year	Social	PFP, Africana, PENNCAP	Yes
Tatiana	On campus 4 years; DuBois 1 year	Pre-Professional	PFP	Yes

Note: Africana = Center for Africana Studies Summer Institute for Pre-Freshmen; Dubois = Dubois College House; PENNCAP = Pennsylvania College Achievement Program; PFP: Pre-Freshmen Program

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