

Running head: FIRST-GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

UNDERSTANDING HOW FIRST-GENERATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN, WOMEN,
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS NAVIGATE THEIR COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE
THROUGH COCURRICULAR PROGRAMS AT ONE IVY INSTITUTION

By

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FIRST-GENERATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Homer and Odessa Moss: Even though you are no longer with me, I am grateful each day for your support and love. Growing up, I never felt there was anything I could not do. I stand in amazement of your foresight for my life, even though you did not have the experiences you afforded me, you knew you wanted better for your daughter. From as far back as I can remember, I was involved in an activity. I started out as a Brownie (Girl Scout), and then there were the piano lessons. Then, I asked you about baton lessons. After a few months of baton, I was taking ballet, tap, and jazz. There were competitions, pageants, recitals (dance and piano), camping trips, and so many more activities. What I did not realize at the time, was how much time and money those activities required, until I had children of my own. You never said no to anything you saw as a positive influence in my life. In fact, I only remember hearing, “Nett, as long as you are doing good, we will support you.” Mom and Dad, I am still doing good. Thank you!

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teaching, writing a book, and countless other ways you have supported our family and me. You are appreciated.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a phenomenological study of how eight first-generation African American undergraduate women at an Ivy League institution used cocurricular programs as support networks to navigate their collegiate experience. First-generation African American women attending predominantly White institutions experience unique adjustment, compared to other college students and work harder to create their own social and cultural networks in the larger college community (Constantine & Watt, 2002). Examined in the research are the lived experiences of eight first-generation African American women to understand how they used cocurricular programs to successfully navigate their matriculation at an Ivy institution. This study was designed to discuss the skills and strategies they learned and used from their cocurricular involvement, and their recommendations to enhance and strengthen their collegiate experience. Using the frameworks of critical race theory, sense of belonging, and Black feminist theory, the researcher analyzed and coded participant interview responses and explored how these women negotiated and managed their multiple identities at an Ivy institution. Three themes emerged from the research questions: (a) cocurricular involvement, (b) development of skills and strategies, and (c) creating belongingness and inclusiveness. Subthemes from each question were a lens into participants' unique perspectives on how they managed, negotiated, and thrived in communities they created for themselves at an elite Ivy institution setting. Understanding these students' lived experiences during their matriculation at an Ivy League institution will provide meaning to African American women's individual and group role in higher education. The findings provide recommendations for Ivy institutions to be intentional about creating inclusive spaces to address issues and challenges African American women manage for their successful navigation. Results of this study contribute to the literature on understanding how first-

generation African American undergraduate women navigate and make meaning of their collegiate experience through cocurricular programs at an Ivy League institution.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Access in Higher Education

The foundation of U.S. democracy is rooted in educational access and opportunity. The American Dream is the emphatic conviction that, in this society, education opens doors to success, and that with talent and hard work, even the poorest American—no matter what race, creed, or culture—can achieve greatness (Hochschild, 1995). America’s “dream” has been traumatic for African Americans, as racial discrimination has been the source of inequality, exploitation, oppression, and marginalization (W. R. Allen, 2005). The terms *Black* and *African American* are used synonymously in this research to represent people (or more specifically students) who have African American, African, Caribbean, and/or Black Latina heritage. For Black people, “the centuries-old struggle for access and success in higher education has been emblematic of a larger fight for personhood and equality in America” (W. R. Allen, 2005, p. 19). After 250 years of slavery and 100 years of segregation, African Americans, noted legal victories like *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and the oppression of Jim Crow laws in 1965, but faced structured inequality, multigenerational poverty, racial discrimination, and substandard education (W. R. Allen, 2005).

Initially, a small number of freed slaves who attended White schools like Middlebury College (in Vermont), Amherst, Bowdoin, and Oberlin had access to higher education (Harper, Patton, and Wooden, 2009). Before the Civil War, freed slaves and their children attended Cheyney State College, Lincoln University, and Wilberforce University—all Black institutions (Harper, Patton, and Wooden, 2009). According to Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009), these three institutions ignited what would eventually become a major access movement for African Americans: the establishment of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). During

the 1940s, “90% of African American degree holders had been educated at HBCUs” (Harper et al., 2009, p. 396), and only a small percentage was allowed to matriculate at predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

African Americans have persisted in higher education despite discrimination and inequitable institutional practices. W. R. Allen (2005) further elaborated, initially, affirmative action programs in higher education attempted to open doors of opportunity for people of color, women, and others normally overlooked by society to prove their worth. These programs did not guarantee success, but rather provided the chance to compete and the opportunity to succeed—or fail. Since the rollback of affirmative action “a season of gains for Blacks in college enrollment and earned degrees has been reversed” (W. R. Allen, 2005, p. 20). There have been concerns over the low college enrollment rates, retention, and degree completion of African Americans since the affirmative action rollbacks (W. R. Allen, 2005). Additional concerns include high underrepresentation of African Americans at PWIs, experiences of racism on campuses, low Black male matriculation rates, and inequitable state and federal funding for HBCUs.

While the number of diverse student populations has increased on university campuses, many institutions still struggle with being prepared to provide an inclusive campus environment for students of color. African American students face “encompassed institutionally related factors such as campus-wide internalized oppression, negative classroom experiences, and underdeveloped support systems” (Hannan, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016, p. 652). Coupled with the reality that many African American students are first in their families to attend college, they encounter unique challenges as first-generation students. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2017), about one third of college students are considered first-generation, and many of them are students of color. Navigating the campus culture, cultivating

relationships, pursuing opportunities, participating in cocurricular activities, and learning how to advocate for themselves will aid African American students in having a positive collegiate experience.

African American Women in Higher Education

Despite institutional attempts to support diversity on college campuses, Kelly, Segoshi, Adams, and Raines (2017) explained few researchers have explored qualitative experiences of Black women or their struggles, particularly at PWIs, Ivy League, or Ivy institutions. While African American women college students have made great strides, they continue to face “related obstacles such as campus-wide internalized oppression, negative classroom experiences, and underdeveloped support systems” (Glenn & Johnson, 2012, p. 352). Between 1998 and 2008, there was a 67% increase in African American women student enrollment in college, with a 60% growth in African American women pursuing bachelor’s degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

It is important to understand how the intersections of race, gender, first-generation student status, and the college experience have influenced African American women. Stewart (2008) emphasized the importance of understanding and describing how African American women negotiate their multiple identities. The unique intersections for African American women often include limited support networks, resources, and services to assist in navigation of the collegiate experience. African American women have challenges, struggles, and marginalized positionality as they integrate into PWI environments (Stewart, 2008). Marginalization of African American women is defined as their alienation and powerless position in mainstream society (Stewart, 2008). African American college women’s successful matriculation has not been at the forefront of educational discussions on student success. Researchers’ limited focus on

African American college women suggests they “experience a form of ‘double jeopardy’ because of their subordinate race and gender statuses” (Miller, 2017, p. 156). Banks (2006) stated much of the literature on Black student life in college operates from a deficit model—that is, there is a focus on what students lack socially and academically, and the impact these perceived deficits have on their success in higher education. Henry, West, and Jackson (2010) articulated the particular importance of expanding researchers’ knowledge about experiences of African American women college students. In support of their understanding lived experiences, there is also interest in how Black women use the lens of race and gender to illuminate the multifaceted nature of identity formation in the context of the Black woman’s experience (Henry et al., 2010, p. 239). Understanding these students’ lived experiences during their matriculation at a PWI provides meaning to their individual and group role in higher education. African American women attending PWIs experience a unique college transition experience compared to their White college peers and work harder to create their own social and cultural networks within the larger college community (Constantine & Watt, 2002). Thus, it is crucial to examine African American women’s experiences related to their successful Ivy matriculation.

The Ivy Experience

The Ivy League collegiate experience was not a reality for Black women students until the late 1960s, and their transition into these institutions was met with barriers, rejection, and isolation (Bradley, 2018). Bradley (2018) recounted the Ivy experience of a Black, woman student at Cornell University as “colored by loneliness, and it was intensified by the fact that there were only two other Black women in her class” (p. 89). These women not only faced racism and sexism, but were also confronted by White students who asked to watch them wash, touch, and comb their hair. Such a suggestion “was voyeuristic, objectifying, and dehumanizing”

(Bradley, 2018, p. 89) for the students. Many Black women felt their White peers were not accustomed to interacting with Black students, viewed them as foreign objects, and challenged their humanity. Former First Lady, Michelle Obama (2018), described her collegiate experience at Princeton University as a first-generation student as a time when “students of color largely stuck together” (p. 74). Obama (2018) wrote her Ivy experience did not resemble the “ethnically blended” (p. 74) photographs in the college brochures. In reflecting on her time at Princeton University, Obama (2018) shared, “I needed my Black friends, we provided one another with relief and support” (pp. 74-75). As more Black students enrolled in Ivy institutions, administrators learned they did not know how to relate to these students, and their successful matriculation required more than what the classroom experience offered. Leaders at Ivy institutions started to recognize having a racially diverse campus involved “a curriculum that showed an awareness of the Black experience; and cocurricular experiences and spaces required the commitment, intentionality, analysis, assessment, and resources of the institutions themselves” (Bradley, 2018, p. 363). In the wake of diversity and inclusion awareness, it is necessary to reevaluate support systems that exist at Alpha University, to foster an environment where African American women students are engaged and take advantage of cocurricular programs offered for their optimal success. The pseudonym Alpha University is used to refer to this Ivy institution.

Do I Belong?

There is a connection between sense of belonging in higher education and first-generation, African American, women student persistence. Strayhorn (2012) explained *sense of belonging* is “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation or connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued

by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 27). While sense of belonging reinforces positive indications of social support, Black college students have “reported feeling socially isolated, experiencing numerous racial macroaggressions, and encountering multiple stereotypes at PWIs” (Carson, 2009, p. 329). Croom, Beatty, Acker, and Butler (2017) emphasized researchers have highlighted college students who engage in group activities, such as student organizations, and fully participate in those student organizations, increase their leadership skills.

In this study, the term *cocurricular* is used to refer to clubs, organizations, and programs where students gain opportunities to develop interests or skill sets not directly related to their academic pursuits (Strayhorn, 2012). Cocurricular activities may be coordinated and supported by the institution, but may not necessarily be intentionally connected to academic learning. Strayhorn (2012) further observed students may pursue academic and social support to provide them with the opportunity to matter, such as student organizations or relations with others, or they may also engage in “antisocial, unhealthy behaviors” (p. 42) to feel sense of belonging. There is a positive relationship between involvement in academic and social activities and students’ belonging in college than their peers who are not involved in clubs or were involved less frequently (Strayhorn, 2012). Involvement in cocurricular activities has the potential to influence positive engagement for Black, undergraduate women in PWI environments. Their experiences in cocurricular activities are crucial to this research study.

Black women students often work to balance “multiple loyalties” (Fhagen-Smith, Vandiver, Worrell, & Cross, 2010, p. 176), like race and gender, to thrive in predominantly White environments. It is important for leaders, administrators, and staff at PWIs to understand, highlight, and promote the influences of Black women students and to provide support networks

to assist in navigating their college experiences. Researchers suggest Black feminist theory includes a “construct to explore the issue of how race and gender are related to produce an integrated analysis of power and oppression” (Burnham, 2001, p. 2). Researchers use this theoretical perspective for African American women to show the importance of understanding multiple identities of college students, including race and gender, as students negotiate multiple identities. The Black feminist theoretical perspective intersects with this research by acknowledging the struggles students negotiate, allowing these marginalized women to express their experiences, and creating meaning of their educational experiences.

Watt (2006) commented a void exists in the literature on the influences of gender and race on how African American women experience college. It is important to research how African American women “negotiate their multiple identities” (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016, p. 653) to understand how their collegiate environment influences their lived experiences during their attendance at an Ivy institution. Further research on this topic will be useful to Ivy administrators by providing recommendations for useful and engaging ways to enhance and strengthen the collegiate experience for African American women students. Research results will be useful to “student affairs practitioners and higher education administrators to recognize that developing programs that attend to multiple aspects of identity development is the best way to support African American women in college” (Watt, 2006, p. 331). Understanding how these students manage, negotiate, and thrive through cocurricular activities will enrich their Ivy experience.

I Am the First

The concept of first-generation college students is not a new one, but it is currently a resurging area of interest, as a growing population of first-generation students are pursuing a

college education. Hodges (1999) mentioned the term *first-generation* was initially coined by Adachi as early as 1982, and since that time, the definition has been redefined as additional research included the first-generation population. Payne (2007) explained the most common definition of the first-generation student is still derived from the original definition and is a student who is first in their family (mother, father, or siblings) to complete a college education. Students with family members who may have attended or may be concurrently attending, but have not yet completed, a college or university for an associate's or bachelor's degree are also considered first-generation.

First-generation college students often face obstacles that make their transition into college more difficult. According to recent estimates, 1 in every 6 students on a university campus is a first-generation college student (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Choy (2001) reported first-generation college students were twice as likely to leave college prior to the start of their second academic year than those students whose parents attended college. Ricks (2016) emphasized researchers have found first-generation college students possess limited knowledge of the college student role, college culture, and generally complete fewer credit hours during the first year of college compared to their non-first-generation peers. Many first-generation students “lack the cultural and social capital that other college students possess, and that deficit makes success more difficult for these students” (Ricks, 2016, p. 3). While the topic of first-generation students has received attention in research and college support programs over the past few years, limited research and a limited number of dissertations have been published on experiences of first-generation, African American, women students at Ivy institutions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this inquiry is to close the gap in research available on first-generation, African American, women students and influences of cocurricular programs in their successful matriculation at one Ivy institution. The terms *cocurricular* and *extracurricular* are used interchangeably to denote transformative opportunities intentionally designed to support an integrated learning environment to impact student development and learning outcomes. Implications of this research include improving organization and program support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to navigate their collegiate experience.

Research Questions

The researcher intends to provide an understanding of the support systems necessary for African American women students to thrive and successfully matriculate at one Ivy institution.

The primary research questions for this study included:

1. How do cocurricular programs provide support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to navigate the collegiate experience at one Ivy institution?
2. What skills and strategies do first-generation, African American, women students learn and use from cocurricular programs to assist them in navigating their collegiate experience?
3. How could this Ivy institution create sense of belonging for first-generation, African American, women students through cocurricular programs?

These research questions created an opportunity for participants to give voice and meaning to their experiences and discuss the skills and strategies they learned and used from their

involvement in cocurricular programs to successfully navigate their collegiate experience at an Ivy institution.

Rationale and Significance

As a Black woman growing up in a small, rural town in the South, I was a first-generation college student and needed more support than my White peers as a student in my university. Most of my high school peers' parents attended college and were educators, and it was expected they would attend college because their parents were familiar with the college application process. I did not have the same pedigree, but I grew up thinking, if they can go to college, I could attend as well. In fact, many of my life experiences were shaped looking at the lives of other people and whispering to myself, "If they can do it, then so can I." This is how I ended up in college.

The guidance counselor at my high school—a Black woman—was also a teacher at my father's high school. Yes, she was quite old. The day I had my college and SAT meeting with her, she asked, "Why do you want to go to college?" She mentioned my parents, who were blue-collar workers, were doing well for themselves, and I could easily get a job at one of the local mills and follow in their footsteps. I insisted on going to college, and although I did not test well on the SAT, I was in the top 10% of my class based on my grades. I applied to two colleges: the hometown college and the larger state university. I was accepted into the hometown college first and thought I would attend there. Then, the letter arrived from the larger state university, and I changed my decision because several other friends and classmates were attending this university as well. Again, I had the mindset that if they could attend, then I could too—especially since I had better grades.

When I attended college, the term first-generation student was not used or mentioned, and there were no support programs that offered any type of assistance for students who were the first in their family to attend college. Although my parents were extremely supportive of my process, I had to find my way through college without my parents sharing their knowledge and experiences about their collegiate experience. Finding support at a PWI was difficult and nonexistent at the time. There were numerous campus activities and programs, but without any real guidance, I plotted my own process without the university support prevalent on many campuses today.

However, I had two opportunities that changed the trajectory of my college career: I auditioned and was selected to be a member of the dance team that was part of the marching band (all 4 years as an undergraduate and dance advisor in graduate school), and I was selected in my senior year as a minority assistance peer leader. My involvement in these activities had a major impact on my transition to college, my retention academically as a student, and in my immediate enrollment in a graduate program after college. In reflection, much of my knowledge and matriculation in college occurred very serendipitously, as there was no mention of any programs or support for first-time college students. The rationale for this research is programs, services, and support networks are vitally important for all students, but especially for first-generation, African American, women students whose uniqueness of gender and race and marginalized status can make the Ivy collegiate experience more difficult to navigate.

Statement of the Problem

There is a need to understand the unique experiences of first-generation, African American, women students. According to Mitchell (2016), while it is difficult for many students of color, “African American women endure a double-bias, being a woman and African

American, which presents them with a complex set of issues” (p. 6). In terms of degree attainment, 65.9% of African American women attain undergraduate degrees compared to 34.1% of African American males, and there continues to be a gap in degree attainment between White and African American college women (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Most researchers of first-generation students examine general collective experiences of Black students. Watt (2006) explained there is a deficit in the literature on “the influences of gender and race on how African American women experience college” (as cited in Hannon et al., 2016, p. 653). As a marginalized group, a need exists for more research on how first-generation Black women students navigate their collegiate experience, their use of extracurricular programs, and what additional support programs can be incorporated to enhance and improve the collegiate experience at one Ivy institution. Dahlvig (2010) commented, while African American women are enrolling in college at increasing rates, many African American women attending PWIs often encounter social, emotional, or academic barriers while on the path to graduation, which may lead to feelings of isolation and a disconnectedness to the college experience. Student diversity has increased at Ivy League schools, but is there equity, access, and inclusion for all students in the Ivy experience? Papadakis (2017) observed even though there is “burgeoning research on first-generation students, there is a dearth of literature focusing on Ivy League first-generation students” (p. 8). Research on experiences of African American women students and their Ivy cocurricular experience is nonexistent. The researcher is conducting this inquiry to close the gap in research available on first-generation, African American, women students and the influences of cocurricular programs on their successful matriculation at an Ivy institution. Implications for this research include improving organization and program support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to successfully navigate their collegiate experience.

Definitions of Key Terms

This section is designed to clarify meanings or to identify people in this research study.

African American – The terms *Black* and *African American* are used synonymously in this study to represent people who have African American, African, Caribbean, and/or Black Latina heritage.

Cisgender – Cisgender means relating to or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth (Cisgender, 2000).

Cocurricular programs – The term is used to refer to clubs, organizations, and programs that give students an opportunity to develop interests or skill sets not directly related to their academic pursuit (Strayhorn, 2012). Cocurricular activities may be coordinated and supported by the institution but may not necessarily be intentionally connected to academic learning (Strayhorn, 2012). For this study, the terms cocurricular and extracurricular are used interchangeably (Stirling & Kerr, 2015).

Community – Community is a term used to define the feeling members have of belonging, or a feeling members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Counter-spaces – This term refers to safe spaces outside of mainstream educational spaces and are occupied by members of underrepresented student groups, e.g., women of color (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

First-generation student – This term refers to a student who is first in their family (mother, father, siblings) to complete a college education (Payne, 2007). Family members may have attended or may be concurrently attending while the first-generation student is enrolled but have not yet completed either an associate's or bachelor's degree (Payne, 2007).

Intersectionality – This term refers to the interconnected nature of social categories, such as race, class, and gender, as they apply to a given individual or group (Settles, 2006).

Intersectionality is also regarded as overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Settles, 2006).

Navigate – This term means to find one’s way, to move or progress through in a logical sequence (Navigate, 2019).

Sister circle – The term is used to describe student organizations—or groups that center race and gender (Croom et al., 2017).

Women – In this research, the term is used to describe cisgender women.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, the researcher examined experiences of first-generation African American women students and how their undergraduate cocurricular experiences affected their matriculation at an Ivy League institution. Limited literature has been published on experiences of African American women matriculating at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and a gap exists in the research on the intersections of race, gender, and first-generation status at Ivy League institutions. According to Anderson (2013), limited studies have provided information and statistics on African American, women college students or college graduates attending PWIs. The purpose of this inquiry was to close the gap in available research on how African American women students navigate their collegiate experience through cocurricular programs at one Ivy institution. The gap in the research is an issue of equity and access in higher education and should be addressed by higher education administrators to ensure first-generation, African American, women students have a more equitable and inclusive matriculation process and collegiate experience at Ivy institutions. Watt (2006) explained a void exists in the literature on the influences of gender and race on how African American women experience college in PWI environments as a marginalized population. The implications for this research include improving organizations, resources, and support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to navigate their collegiate experience. In this literature review, the researcher provides an overview of how these women negotiate and manage their multiple identities through critical race theory (CRT), sense of belonging, and the Black feminist theory perspectives.

Representations of African American Women

The matriculation of first-generation college students has received much attention over the past several years, as these students are found to have limited family support and less of an understanding about the collegiate experience compared to their peers whose parents attended college (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). To frame the need for understanding how African American, women students navigate their collegiate experience through cocurricular programs at one Ivy institution, the researcher examined literature in higher education on first-generation African American women and cocurricular programs. Research findings were sparse on the intersection of first-generation and African American, undergraduate women students and nonexistent with the additional intersection of cocurricular programs.

The matriculation of African American, college women has not been at the forefront of educational discussions about their success as students. These women are enrolling and matriculating at higher numbers than their male counterparts, despite obstacles and challenges (The African American Gender Gap in Ivy League Enrollments, 1995). The success of Black women undergraduate students is often mentioned as “educational resilience, that is, why and how individuals experience success in school despite structural constraints” (O’Connor, 2002, p. 855). Jones-DeWeever (2014) emphasized Black American women held 66% of all bachelor’s degrees attained by Black Americans in 2010. While their matriculation rates have improved, their representation in higher education is not reflective of the overall population of African American women, and these students are not graduating at the same rate as White, Asian, and Latina women (Jones-DeWeever, 2014).

Black women have formed *sister circle* cocurricular organizations or groups, which are created based on their race and gender (Croom et al., 2017). These sister circle spaces on PWI

campuses have been formally and informally constructed by Black women in response to racist and sexist alienation and isolation experiences they have encountered (Porter & Dean, 2015). Finding community in these counter spaces is where these women can engage in productive, academic conversations, develop a social identity, and contend with the systemic oppression on their PWI campus environment (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Miller (2017) further explained neglecting to highlight the experiences of Black college women may prove detrimental to this group; higher education institutions must work to determine the factors that promote or inhibit their success. Banks (2006) stated much of the literature on Black student life in college operates from a deficit model—that is, there is a focus on what students lack socially, academically, and the impact that has on their success in higher education.

To promote their success in-and-out of the classroom, institutions should take a more holistic approach when providing support networks and programming. There is a need for the “social integration and student involvement experiences of Black college women at PWIs to be further explored” (Miller, 2017, p.157). Miller (2017) emphasized understanding the impact of their combined status of race and gender along with how these elements influence their sense of belonging and student engagement as a minoritized group at PWIs is paramount. Henry et al. (2010) articulated the importance of expanding researcher knowledge about the experiences of African American women students in their search for a positive identity. It is crucial to understand how these women navigate their experiences from a theoretical perspective in their campus environment. Zamani (2003) suggested African American college students, particularly women, experience PWI environments as a marginalized population. Additionally, limited research exists on the marginalized experiences of first-generation, African American women at Ivy institutions.

The scope of this literature review includes the unique challenges Black women encounter, including “institutionally related factors such as campus-wide internalized oppression, negative classroom experiences, and underdeveloped support systems” (Glenn & Johnson, 2012, p. 352). African American women students are often overlooked on campus because of their persistence and success. However, researchers have questioned whether “Black women have become victims of their own advancement, creating a paradox of success” (Bond, 2011, p. 135). Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2000) mentioned institutions might not be as eager to invest in Black women students, due to their apparent success, but these students:

Continue to describe their experiences as isolating and painful, articulating feelings of discrimination based on the intersection of their race, gender, and class identities, as well as complaining of a lack of mentors and role models with whom they identify. (as cited in C. H. Patton & Croom, 2017, pp. 76-77)

Colleges and universities are ill equipped to support these students and the academic and social rigors they face in the college environment. Before the campus environment can be improved, these students must be understood and their experiences at Ivy institutions validated to support diverse student populations.

African American women represent a growing number of students attending elite universities as their campuses become more diverse and inclusive. However, “few scholars center the experiences of Black women in higher education literature” (C. H. Patton & Croom, 2017, p. 158), specifically in the context of elite universities. The researcher recognized the unique needs of these students at elite institutions and sought to provide recommendations to build a support network for these students and foster sense of belonging and community where students feel engaged and empowered to participate in cocurricular programs and use campus resources for their successful matriculation through this study.

Recent research by C. H. Patton and Croom (2017) advocated the marginalization of Black undergraduate women often translated into invisibility, which is compounded by devaluing their social and academic needs and challenges. This research explored the observation that Black undergraduate students were perceived as successful, and institutional resources were not allocated to meet their needs based on their achievements. C. H. Patton and Croom used a critical race feminism framework to analyze the narratives of Black, undergraduate women and their visibility in higher education journals and student affairs practices. They noted several implications for practice, including paying careful attention to innovative research and studying the experiences of, and interventions for, Black, undergraduate women to engage in meaningful experiences. Additionally, K. E. Allen (2002) proposed ongoing professional development is a cultural value in student affairs, and practitioners are encouraged to stay abreast of current trends and developments in the field through continued coursework, involvement in professional organizations, and reading academic books and journals focused on postsecondary education.

Researchers further explored racial identity attitudes, perceived fit, and quality of campus life of African American women attending PWIs and HBCUs. Constantine and Watt (2002) explained it seems crucial to understand the link between these perceptions and their general well-being, because these women's quality of life at PWI academic institutions is connected to their perceptions of their cultural fit within these environments. Constantine and Watt used a cultural congruity scale, a gender attitudes assessment, and a satisfaction with life scale to determine the cultural congruity and overall life satisfaction of African American women attending PWIs and HBCUs. The results indicated African American women attending "HBCUs reported higher levels of perceived fit and life satisfaction than their counterparts at PWIs"

(Constantine & Watt, 2002, p. 191). African American women attending HBCUs appear to have less of a cultural and social adjustment than their peers at PWIs. The conclusion was, due to the increased number of African American women matriculating at PWIs, “student affairs personnel in these environments must find ways to increase the environmental comfort levels of African American women” (Constantine & Watt, 2002, p. 191).

Offering programming support is another way for PWIs to retain African American students who need assistance in navigating their campus culture and environment. Constantine and Watt (2002) further explained some African American women who experience low levels of cultural congruity at PWIs might experience such profound adjustment difficulties that they may leave these institutions instead of facing potentially daunting challenges. In conclusion, the researchers mentioned the need for institutions to develop and implement opportunities to make meaningful and engaging connections with African American women, and for “student affairs professionals to be aware of how these students may be experiencing their institutional environments in light of their gender and racial identity attitudes” (Constantine & Watt, 2002, p. 192).

First-generation, African American, women students have unique concerns and issues that necessitate support to aid them in their matriculation process. These students have feelings of alienation as they transition to an unfamiliar space, a fear of homelessness and food insecurities, and a lack of institutional cultural capital their privileged peers possess (Dumais & Ward, 2010). As M. T. Williams (2009) explained, these students’ understandings and positionality must be considered during the orientation process, and structured support programs could be implemented for these women to “feel a greater connection to the college campus, and to the educational process, which would increase their likelihood for success at the college and

beyond” (M. T. Williams, 2009, p. 13). Collins coined the term *outsider within* to describe how African American women felt alienated in school and work settings (M. T. Williams, 2009). There is a need to understand how these African American women learn how to manage and negotiate their identities as outsiders within the Ivy League setting through cocurricular programs to create a connection to the institution and provide meaning to their collegiate experience. In this study, the researcher addressed the importance of cocurricular influences in the successful navigation of first-generation, African American women at an Ivy institution.

Examining the Literature

In their qualitative study, Means and Pyne (2017) studied 10 low-income, first-generation, college students throughout their first year of college and examined support structures provided by their institutions to increase their sense of academic and social belonging. The researchers used Strayhorn’s (2012) *sense of belonging* conceptual framework. Strayhorn argued sense of belonging is a basic human need that is essential to address before higher education leaders and educators can discuss academic and learning goals and outcomes. According to Means and Pyne’s (2017) findings, support programs included comprehensive scholarship programs, social identity-based centers, student organizations, residence hall communities, faculty relationships, and academic support services. These high-impact educational support structures have a positive impact on students’ transition and create sense of belonging, academic achievement, retention, and an overall positive collegiate experience.

When African American women students have sense of belonging in their PWI collegiate environment, their overall well-being, level of success, and campus experience is enhanced (Dortch & Patel, 2017). Cocurricular activities are important in enhancement of the collegiate experience (Stirling & Kerr, 2015). Kuh (2001) explained student participation in cocurricular

programs is widely recognized and promoted as an integral part of the student life experience. Cocurricular opportunities include student participation in “clubs, organizations, associations, student government, recreation, athletics, arts, community service, committee membership, career exploration/mentorship programs, and student life workshops” (Stirling & Kerr, 2015, p. 1). These positive cocurricular interactions enhanced student experiences in and outside of the classroom. It is imperative for institutions to understand and recognize cocurricular programs assist African American women students in navigating their campus environments and enrich student learning.

In their research, Stirling and Kerr (2015) used Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory and Kuh’s (2001) theory on creating high-impact practices in higher education to propose a framework for enhancing the educational quality of postsecondary cocurricular programming. Stirling and Kerr’s study recorded student cocurricular participation and created a framework for enhancing cocurricular engagement. The cocurricular benefits emphasized holistic development of student learning experiences. According to Turrentine, Esposito, Young, and Ostroth (2012), researchers have identified benefits of cocurricular participation, including (a) self-efficacy, (b) satisfaction, (c) feelings of support and institutional challenge, (d) retention, (e) academic achievement and intellectual engagement, and (f) an enhanced understanding of others.

Strayhorn’s (2019) research findings highlight the importance of student involvement and their sense of belonging as instrumental in providing a framework connecting students to matriculation success and their engagement on campus. Strayhorn (2019) observed involvement engenders students’ sense of belonging in college in four ways:

- Connecting students with others who share their interests, values, and commitments;
- Familiarizing students with the campus environment and ecology;

- Affirming students' identity, interests, and values as "a part of campus" (in the words of a participant); and
- Generating feelings among students that they matter and others depend on them (p. 150).

Sense of belonging was the primary motivation for student involvement for the participants in Strayhorn's research. Students did not feel like "part of the campus" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 151) until they were involved in cocurricular activities.

However, Strayhorn's (2019) research revealed all involvement is not necessarily good and does not create sense of belonging. Too much time devoted to cocurricular activities can distract students from their academic pursuits, which can lead to a disconnect from overall campus involvement. Strayhorn (2019) further explained, on PWI campuses, some students of color reported experiencing a "growing awareness of the differences that seemed to heighten concerns about their safety, support, and belonging" (p. 151), "feeling like strangers in an unknown land" (p. 151), and being "the only [colored] face in a sea of Whiteness" (p. 151). However, student involvement can have a positive impact and foster sense of belonging for students managing multiple identities with the support and encouragement of higher education administrators and participation in cocurricular activities.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework often used "to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). This theory was originally designed as a tool for researchers to examine race, law, and power in the 1970s, and to address inequitable legal practices against marginalized people. In 1994, CRT was introduced as "an analytical tool to

measure inequity in education and tailored to unveil the educational disparities that plagued marginalized citizens” (Daftary, 2018, p. 16). Use of CRT as a scholarly framework in the field of education has “provided a critical lens through which a research question and its subsequent answers can be understood” (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018, p. 4). As Daftary (2018) explained, researchers using CRT should remain true to the spirit of CRT throughout the research, reporting, and findings by identifying CRT tenets and applying them to the presentation of the problem, research question, data collection methods, presentation of results, and implications of the findings.

In the application of CRT, race and racism connect the research questions and findings of marginalized people through storytelling and first-person narrative voices. The CRT tenets used to guide a general research process include: (a) racism is permanent and endemic to life for people of color, (b) objections to ahistoricism, (c) interest convergence, (d) race is a social construction, (e) property value of whiteness, (f) intersectionality, (g) the unique voice of color and counternarrative, and (h) a critique of liberalism (Daftary, 2018). This researcher used CRT as a theoretical framework to guide the inquiry in the following ways:

- The research questions considered the impact of race and racialization.
- The qualitative interviews honored the voices and perspective of the participants.
- The use of narratives allowed the participants the opportunity to develop a response and share experiences from a personal vantage point.
- The analysis and interpretation of data acknowledged the cultural and historical context of the contemporary world with the understanding that one’s experiences cannot be understood in isolation.

- Discussion and recommendations—necessary in CRT to disrupt various forms of oppression— were provided in the implication for practice, policy, and future research suggestions of the study. (Daftary, 2018)

According to Harper et al. (2018), the burgeoning use of CRT in education research over the past 20 years has resulted in deeper, more sophisticated understanding of racial inequities and other problems associated with race and racism in postsecondary contexts. Critical race theory is useful in higher education research because, as a framework, it “provide[s] a lens for understanding inequities in our education system and sets the stage for accelerated educational reform” (Klupchak, 2014, p. 11).

Sense of Belonging

As mentioned previously, Strayhorn’s (2012) sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation or connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and feeling important to the group (e.g., campus community), or others (e.g., faculty, peers) on campus. Previous research has demonstrated students’ ability to find sense of belonging in college is positively associated with their intent to persist to degree completion (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). Through this sense of belonging students engage in the campus environment and climate to feel a sense of community, therefore demonstrating the positive likelihood of college persistence and success (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). While understanding how the influence of the campus experience creates sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter (1997) commented sense of belonging has been seldom studied and inconsistently defined in higher education literature as a theoretical construct. Researchers have found there are positive associations between sense of belonging and indicators of physiological well-being, but sense of belonging has not been extensively examined

within Black racial identity models (Cruwys, South, Greenaway, & Haslam, 2014). Examination of sense of belonging in Black racial groups is limited because many Black individuals have collectivistic worldviews and put the needs of the group before the individual (Carson, 2009). Sense of belonging and finding community is important to Black college students' ability to thrive in contexts they do not always experience as welcoming to their cultural values (Hunter, Case, & Harvey, 2019).

Sense of belonging framework is more consistent with the construct of student support for first-generation students. Weber (2016) mentioned first-generation college students, or lower income students, have a harder time fitting into campus life than non-first-generation college students, and often those students who have felt sense of belonging have adjusted and persisted better than students who have not felt as they belonged. The limitation of the sense of belonging framework for this research inquiry is it does not adequately address intersections African American women students represent or consider their experiences of feeling marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed (Strayhorn, 2019). However, research by Johnson et al. (2007) covered what effects Black students' sense of belonging, including interactions with peers and faculty, cocurricular involvement, perceptions of campus racial climate, and living on campus.

Finding sense of belonging can be difficult for Black students to manage in PWI environments. Black, women students often work to balance "multiple loyalties" (e.g., race and gender; Fhagen-Smith et al., 2010, p. 176) to thrive in PWI campus environments. When examining the multiple dimensions of group membership like those presented by African American women, some researchers have used the racial identity framework to address the different intersections that exist among African Americans. Fhagen-Smith et al. (2010) further explained Black racial identity attitudes are best described as a set of multidimensional attitudes

and a multitude of racial identity attitudes that exist among African Americans. These racial identity-attitude patterns act as social, emotional, and cognitive maps, which “affect how African American individuals interpret and decipher events, relational interactions, and other experiences in their world” (Fhagen-Smith et al. 2010, p. 165). In their racial identity research, Fhagen-Smith et al. emphasized individuals who belong to multiple oppressed social groups based on race, gender, and/or social class occupy unique social positions, which can be understood by considering multiple dimensions of group membership at the same time. It is crucial for institutions to understand, highlight, and promote multiple dimensions and experiences of Black women students and to provide support networks to assist in the navigation process. This inquiry will bring focus to the multiple dimensions of theoretical frameworks that can be used to provide research context to the underdeveloped support systems and campus environment African American women learn to navigate for success.

Intersectionality is an approach to understanding how both race/ethnicity and gender simultaneously shape an individual’s experience (Settles, 2006). The intersections of race, gender, class, and first-generation status determine how Black women experience stress and isolation in dominant culture environments (Settles, 2006). First-generation, African American women negotiate multiple identities and struggle to assimilate and persist at PWIs without proper networks of support (Stewart, 2008). Managing their multiple identities is already a “challenging feat for many students but is often a significant barrier for Black women at PWIs” (Miller, 2017, p. 159). The intersectional perspective describes how Black women may see themselves more in terms of this combined, unique identity than additively as Black people and women (King, 1988). Regardless of the challenges of intersectionality experienced by Black women students, understanding the significance and nuances of their identity, and challenges they face as unique

individuals, will “help student affairs and higher education professionals develop strategic approaches to addressing Black college women’s needs” (Miller, 2017, p. 160).

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist theory as a construct is used to explore how race and gender are related to producing an integrated analysis of power and oppression (Burnham, 2001). Black feminist theory “contributes another theoretical lens by which most compellingly permits for the experiences of African-American women to be heard” (Mitchell, 2016, p. 14). As Few (2007) explained, Black feminist theory resulted from Black feminist activists and scholars feeling far removed from White, middle-class, liberal feminist discourses. In this study, the researcher used the marginalized perspective of African American women and emphasized the importance of understanding the multiple identities of college students, including race and gender, as they negotiate their multiple identities. Martin (1993) wrote Black feminism allows a creative space where, according to one’s own social location or station in life, Black women can “legitimately” place a foot in two or more realities—what one individually and or collectively may perceive of what it is to be “Black” and what it is to be a “woman” simultaneously. This intersectionality gives Black women the opportunity to share their diverse perspectives, and it also gives researchers the framework to move away from making generalized statements about the Black woman experience. As articulated by the Combahee River Collective (1977) and Patricia Hill Collins (1991), Black feminists:

- acknowledge Black women’s historical struggle against multiple oppressions;
- examine how Black women and their families negotiate the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class;
- eradicate malignant images of Black womanhood; and

- incorporate an activist perspective into their research through cocreation of knowledge with informants, consciousness raising, and empowerment in the context of Black women's lives.

P. Williams (2011) indicated there are situations unique to African American women on college campuses. Rosales and Person (2003) proposed African American, women, undergraduate students have different challenges than their White peers at the collegiate level, which should be addressed by administrators. Challenges include overcoming fear, conflict, and limited support systems on their campuses. In a variety of institutional settings, African American women may also feel overwhelmed, discouraged, and underprepared for the rigors of the collegiate experience. Black feminist theory is a perspective that affords African American women attending PWIs the theoretical lens and opportunity to voice their experiences.

As an example of how Black feminism theory is integrated into research, P. Williams (2011) explored experiences of working class, Black, undergraduate women at an Ivy League university. In this study, five women juggling work, academic studies, and social lives were asked questions about experiences at this Ivy institution. William's qualitative research sought to highlight various ways race, gender, and class intersect to shape social experiences of Black, working-class women within the context of one Ivy League university. Black feminist thought was an "appropriate framework for explaining and making sense of the experiences of these Black college women" (Williams, 2011 as cited in C. H. Patton & Croom, 2017, p. 159). The implications and conclusions of this research noted how Black feminist thought allowed these women to tell their stories and experiences to fully understand their outsider status in an environment occupied by a dominate group. P. Williams concluded the research findings will aid institutional leaders when making decisions about how to support Black women on their

campuses, focusing on economic and psychological concerns that may impede their success. Howard-Hamilton (2003) proposed Black feminist thought is important in assisting Black college women to effectively deal with the multitude of microaggressive indignities (i.e., racist attitudes and behaviors) encountered in their daily campus experiences. In this study, the researcher used Black feminist thought as a tool to understand how first-generation Black women managed and negotiated their experiences as marginalized students.

The tenets of CRT intersect with Black feminist theory in understanding the experiences of African American women students at PWIs. Few (2007) stated the tenets, in addition to the views and voices of these women, provide an exceptional foundation for examining the plight of this unique set of women. To conceptualize how African American women students make meaning of their Ivy institutional experience, Black feminist thought was designed to interpret their experiences, “understanding the notion that there are common threads across the individual experiences and lastly recognizing that some of the connected experiences result in different viewpoints” (Mitchell, 2016, p. 15).

Other Relevant Theories

Other theorists have investigated ways in which theoretical frameworks can be integrated into scholarly practice. According to Miller (2017), college administrators used Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure and Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement to evaluate the relationship between Black college women’s self-reported gains, social integration, and student involvement. Higher education administrators used Tinto’s theory to explain the “attrition process that impacts a student’s decision to leave college, and Miller argued that several factors operate collectively, such as goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and personal integration that influence the departure decision” (Miller, 2017, p. 157). Tinto further argued

students are more likely to persist if they have a better academic and social integration (Miller, 2017). A limitation and critique of the theory is that Tinto did not address the cultural perspective of students of color (Miller, 2017).

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, focused more on the student's role and contributions to their own academic experience in social and academic activities. Astin's theory reinforced students who are involved in various aspects of college life and the campus experience are likely to have a more meaningful academic experience and will persist and thrive as a successful student (Miller, 2017). Miller (2017) mentioned a critique of Astin's theory is the focus on the student's behavior without regard for impact of the environment (i.e., institutional campus culture), which is a major factor in experiences for Black college women.

First-Generation Students

Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) observed U.S. higher education professionals and the U.S. public have been fascinated with the population of first-generation students—broadly conceived as those first in their family to attend college—in part, because they symbolize the social inequality colleges and universities are perceived to help stamp out. First-generation student persistence in higher education includes challenges and conflicts that impede student success. According to Dumais and Ward (2010), first-generation students experience feelings of alienation, as they transition to an unfamiliar space, including the uncertainty of navigating accepted decorum and persistent fear of homelessness and starvation between academic terms. The status of being a first-generation student “reveals policies, norms, and cultural processes of institutions that privilege the experiences and knowledge of ‘traditional’ students, whose parents attended college” (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018, p. 147). Terenzini et al. (1995) emphasized first-generation students come to college facing a number of psychological and emotional obstacles,

including anxiety about their ability to succeed and stressful changes in their relationships with family and friends. Understanding the complexity of these students' lives and supporting their difficulties requires a concerted effort from institutions to address challenges first-generation students encounter. When compounding the factors of first-generation status with race and ethnicity, these students struggle academically and socially in their unfamiliar collegiate environment. Mean and Pyne (2017) observed students of color at PWIs experience overt and covert forms of racism, unfair treatment by faculty members, expectations to assimilate to White-centered campus environments, and academic and social loneliness. Students of color are often unprepared for the racial/ethnic isolation and alienation they experience at PWIs (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Institutional preparation and support are important to first-generation students, as they transition to college and learn to navigate the campus culture and environment.

The transition for Ivy League students can be complicated, as they manage their first-generation student status and the intense rigors of their academics. Success of first-generation students is institutionally important to highly selective schools in the interest of institutional diversity, quality, and commitment to the ideal of education as a public good (Clarke, 2000). Clarke's (2000) doctoral dissertation provided an overview of 10 first-generation freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania and how these students made meaning of their college experience. Two participants were African American women and described their experiences as freshmen as a time when they explored their blackness and female status at an Ivy institution. These students described their experiences with "mixed emotions" (Clarke, 2000, p. 168), as they encountered racism, discrimination, disrespect, and microaggressions in and outside the classroom. One participant's roommate asked "if Black peoples' blood is different from White peoples" (Clarke,

2000, p. 172) and “why her skin tone wasn’t as dark as some other Black people” (p. 172). These comments and experiences can leave students feeling isolated and unsupported during their matriculation process. More recently, elite colleges have invested more time and resources in cultivating sense of belonging by helping students connect to the institution’s diversity and inclusion culture and values. Landers (2018) mentioned helping students feel sense of belonging increases likelihood of student success and retention.

Summary

Limited literature has been published on the experiences of African American women matriculating at PWIs, and a gap exists in the research on the intersections of race, gender, and first-generation status at Ivy institutions. There is a need for researchers to explore undergraduate, cocurricular experiences of African American women students at Ivy institutions. Croom et al. (2017) indicated few researchers explore undergraduate women, specifically their campus involvement, and even fewer explore their motivations for engagement. Previous researchers found cocurricular activities provide an opportunity for students to create safe, supportive spaces on campus (Croom et al., 2017). Researchers also found there is “positive persistence for Black women who are involved in college cocurricular organizations which play a significant role in influencing their retention” (Hotchkins, 2017, p. 145) and overall student success. Limited literature is published about the experiences of African American women matriculating at PWIs, and there is a gap in research focused on the intersections of race, gender, first-generation status, and cocurricular participation at Ivy institutions.

This inquiry attempted to address the gap in available research on how African American, women students navigate their collegiate experience through cocurricular involvement at an Ivy institution. The researcher also addressed the intersections of their multiple identity positions and

use of CRT, sense of belonging, and Black feminist framework to understand the complex needs of these students. Implications for this inquiry include improving institutional and cocurricular program support networks for first-generation, African American women students to develop the tools to successfully navigate their Ivy collegiate experience. Through institutional support, student development, and faculty and staff development, campus spaces could be created to address the unique needs of African American women participating in cocurricular programs. These women should feel supported, engaged, and empowered to successfully navigate their matriculation process.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology used to study unique experiences of African American women students at an Ivy institution. This research was a phenomenological study to understand how first-generation African American undergraduate women use cocurricular programs as support networks to navigate their undergraduate collegiate experience. Researchers use the phenomenological method to examine lived experiences of participants to understand their perspectives and feelings (Creswell, 2007). Researchers also use phenomenological research to investigate common experiences, develop practices, or challenge policy to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the given phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In this chapter, the researcher describes the methodology used to study the lived experiences of participants, and includes background information about the research setting, research sample, and participant recruitment process. The questions that guided the research inquiry are:

1. How do cocurricular programs provide support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to navigate the collegiate experience at one Ivy institution?
2. What skills and strategies do first-generation, African American, women students learn and use from cocurricular programs to assist them in navigating their collegiate experience?
3. How could this Ivy institution create sense of belonging for first-generation, African American, women students through cocurricular programs?

Additionally, this chapter includes a description of data collection methods, data analysis methods, issues of trustworthiness, and limitations of the research.

Rationale for Research Approach

This phenomenological research is guided by the assumption that students who engage in meaningful experiences in –and -out of the classroom are more likely to experience positive outcomes across higher education contexts (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As undergraduate Black women’s enrollment has increased, Rosales and Person (2003) mentioned many PWIs fail to understand the specific challenges encountered by these students and, therefore, often neglect to provide necessary support programs. However, leaders in higher education currently view research pertaining to the experiences of Black women as valid, and administrators are exploring remedies to understand and support this population of students (Rosales and Person, 2003). Kvale (1996) commented:

Phenomenology is interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subjects’ perspectives of their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects’ consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings. (p. 53)

This researcher used this methodology to give meaning to these students lived experiences in their own words.

Phenomenological researchers “acknowledge that it is not possible to contemplate a phenomenon without some degree of personal involvement and intentionality” (Willig, 2007, p. 214). As a Black woman and first-generation college student, this researcher’s identity intersects with those of the research participants. It was necessary for this researcher to ensure her biases did not influence this research, but rather helped students to feel more at ease in sharing their undergraduate experiences.

Establishing my positionality was an important component of establishing context for the qualitative research and development of research questions. These questions empowered participants to share their stories unencumbered by the research expectations or outcomes (Creswell, 2007). Participants were informed in the consent form that the interview questions were related to their college experiences, including discussion pertaining to their involvement in cocurricular programs and how their involvement contributes to their collegiate experiences and success as a student. Agee (2009) proposed qualitative inquiries involve asking the kinds of questions that focus on the *why* and *how* of human interactions. In a qualitative study, questions are centered on uncovering individual and group perspectives (Agee, 2009). Creswell (2007) suggested good qualitative questions should invite a process of exploration and discovery. Other open-ended questions were asked to understand how these students navigated their experiences in cocurricular programs.

Research Setting

This research took place at an Ivy institution in the Northeast region of the United States. The institution is a private, coeducational research institution, that provides instruction to undergraduate and graduate students. The pseudonym Alpha University is used to refer to this Ivy institution. This institution is considered a PWI due to the history of initially only admitting White men, its connection with slavery, “strict racial separation and blatant stereotypes” (Bradley, 2018, p. 48), and the fact Black, male students were not able to enroll until the mid-1950s. Black women were not permitted to enroll until approximately the 1970s. Today, Alpha University is attentive to diversity and inclusion issues and the expanding educational experiences to meet the diverse needs of its students. During the 2018-2019 academic year, Alpha University had approximately 5,000 undergraduate students, and fewer than 400 of those

students (7.8%) identified as Black or African American. At the time of this research, Alpha University elected not to release the total of enrolled first-generation, African American women students.

Research Sample

Glesne (2006) argued a final participant sample should be selected with a specific purpose in mind, and participants selected should authentically produce the richest and thickest description around the issue being studied. Student selection was based on purposeful sampling. Germane to the research, it was important for participants to self-identify as a Black or African American woman; be a first-generation undergraduate college student at the sophomore, junior, or senior level; and have participated in at least one cocurricular activity at this Ivy institution. Because phenomenological research is based on lived experiences, juniors and seniors were the initial target population. It was the assumption that, at this point in their educational journey, they should be better acclimated to the institution and have a better understanding of their experience (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As a phenomenological study, it was important for participants to experience a similar phenomenon, and juniors and seniors have a better understanding of their educational journey than freshmen and sophomores. However, this researcher received an email from a sophomore asking to participate in the study who met all other research requirements, including cocurricular involvement. The student indicated another sophomore was also interested in participating. The researcher decided to include these students in the research sample after they expressed an interest to participate.

Sample Size

There has been much debate on the appropriate research sample size in qualitative inquiry. Morse (2015) explained the size of the sample depends on the nature of the

phenomenon, its concrete versus subjective nature, the amount of complexity and scope of the phenomenon, and, of course, how much is already known about the topic. Creswell (2007) recommended researchers interview between five and 25 participants. A sample of eight African American first-generation women undergraduate students self-selected to participate in this research investigation. There were five seniors, one junior, and two sophomore participants. The researcher originally set out to interview 10 to 12 participants and continued recruiting participants during the interview process. After eight interviews, the researcher felt participants shared many of the same experiences at Alpha University, and the research had reached a saturation point. Faulkner and Trotter (2017) explained saturation refers to the point in the research process when no new information is discovered in data analysis, and this redundancy signals to researchers data collection may cease. While there is not an agreed upon method of establishing data saturation, after the eighth interview, the researcher concluded additional interviews would yield similar experiences, themes, and recommendations. Reaching saturation in qualitative research is an indication purposeful sampling has been achieved (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Additionally, at a saturation point, this study can be replicated to achieve similar results based on the sample size.

Participant Recruitment

The researcher spoke to several colleagues at Alpha University to determine the best strategy to recruit students who met the research criteria. The researcher was informed of a student organization event for all African American students held at the beginning of each school year, sponsored by the Black Student Union (BSU). This event is a yearly opportunity for all African American, undergraduate students to gather and form community with the incoming freshman class. This event is open to campus faculty and administrators; however, the researcher

contacted the president of the BSU to introduce herself and gain approval to share her research flyer (see Appendix A). This event proved to be an excellent opportunity to advertise the researcher's inquiry with Black student clubs and organizations and to talk to students about her research and dissertation. The researcher emailed a colleague in the first-generation, low-income center to ask to disseminate the research participant flyer. The research flyer was also shared with colleagues in the African American studies and gender studies departments to post on message boards. The researcher also received approval to leave the flyer in the African American student affinity space and email the flyer to African American student organizations.

In addition to the flyers, the researcher also used referral sampling, also known as snowball sampling, by asking participants after their interviews to assist the researcher by sharing the research flyer in their friend groups. At least two research participants mentioned they heard about the researcher's study from their friends. Another component of phenomenological research is purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals who add knowledge and experience about a phenomenon (M. Q. Patton, 1980). This strategy allows participants to self-select their participation, and as a result, they are more likely to provide meaningful contributions to the research. The researcher offered a \$25 gift card to each student who participated in both the individual interview and the focus group. The incentive was important in recognizing and appreciating each participant's contribution to this research and the time spent away from their academics and activities.

Data Collection Methods

The Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval to conduct research was received from both Rider University and the Ivy institution. Members of IRB review and approve all research involving human subjects to ensure research is conducted in accordance with all federal,

institutional, and ethical guidelines. According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014), a general rule is, if the inquiry will be published as a dissertation, shared through publication in a national journal, presented at a national meeting, or if the aim of the inquiry is to generate knowledge, an IRB approval should be obtained.

Creswell (2007) noted the foundation of qualitative research can be gained in collection of data through phenomenological research generally completed in comprehensive interviews. Participant data were collected from one 60-minute in-person interview and a 60-minute focus group interview. There were two focus group sessions to accommodate students' busy schedules. Participant interviews were the primary method of data collection.

Interview Protocol

Interviews were held in a private campus office or a library study room. Participants were emailed to confirm the interview time and location. The informed consent form (see Appendix B) was attached in the confirmation email for review. As a part of the research protocol, each participant reviewed and signed the consent form prior to each individual and focus group interview. Each participant received a copy of the informed consent form, and the researcher also kept a copy. Individual interviews and focus groups began with reading the interview protocol script and then the open-ended questions (see Appendix C). Participants were previously informed in the participation flyer that the individual interview and focus group interview would last no longer than 60 minutes. Average individual interview time was 38 minutes, with 23 minutes being the shortest interview and 52 minutes being the longest. The two focus group interviews were 40 and 54 minutes. Three participants attended the first focus group, and five attended the second focus group. Individual and focus group data collection took place in October 2019 and November 2019.

Participants were also informed their contributions to this research inquiry were voluntary, and they could choose not to participate or withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty. Participants could choose not to answer any questions to which they felt uncomfortable providing a response. Although participating in this research study posed minimal risks, participants were provided campus counseling center information if they needed assistance managing their feelings after the interview. Lastly, participants were informed all research data would be stored in such a manner that minimal linkage between their identity and responses in the research would exist, and, in the dissertation, they would be identified by a pseudonym. Finally, participants were informed data generated from this study would be used in future conference presentations and publications.

In addition to taking handwritten notes during individual and group interviews, the researcher also kept a journal and made an entry after each individual and focus group interview. According to Janesick (1999), journaling allows researchers to reflect on audio recordings and interview transcripts from their research endeavors. Journal writing has been used throughout history in the arts, medicine, and religion as a reliable research tool (Janesick, 1999). Janesick (1999) further discussed how researchers become connoisseurs of their own thinking and reflection through journal writing. General recordings for this research included a description of how the interview proceeded, what insights were gathered from the interview, and if any adjustments were needed to the research questions or interview format. The journaling process proved to be a good reflection and debriefing tool during the research process.

Research questions in both the individual interviews and focus group were standard, open-ended questions. All participants were asked identical questions, taking care to relate theme to theory. Individual interviews were coded to decipher themes, strategies, and

recommendations. Following a Black feminist theoretical perspective (Collins, 1991), the interviews afforded these African American women the opportunity to voice and make meaning of their experiences in their Ivy setting. The researcher centered research questions on the participants' ability to verbally express their experiences to find sense of belonging and how they engaged with their campus environment and culture through cocurricular involvement. Additionally, the researcher used CRT as the theoretical framework and open-ended research questions to consider the impact of race and racialization of these marginalized students' experiences and their first-person narrative voices as discussed in Chapter 2.

Transcribe and Coding

Individual and group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Rev.com transcription services. During the first reading of the transcripts, participants were given a pseudonym, and names of identifying organizations were replaced with a pseudonym or removed. Also, the researcher listened to the audio recording while reading the printed transcript to clarify any inaudible words. Transcripts were analyzed for common word themes using MAXQDA, a qualitative research software. This initial word search allowed the researcher to identify the exact location of common words in each interview.

During the next transcript reading, the researcher located common words and coded each transcript by highlighting themes from each interview. Coding is a process of analyzing and disaggregating data "into manageable segments and identifies or names those segments" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 16) and then categorizing them. The researcher reread the transcripts, this time color coding with sticky note tabs and markers. After each interview reading, the researcher hand wrote the emerging subthemes from strategies learned from cocurricular programs and recommendations suggested from each participant. The researcher used a comparative

methodology across the individual interviews to “delineate the different themes and patterns in the data” (Mitchell, 2016, p. 40). Lincoln and Guba (1985) supported the use of comparative methodology to analyze individual groups of information. The researcher used common subthemes to create a participant-checking document (see Appendix D). The researcher then revised the focus group interview protocol script and open-ended questions based on the themes, strategies, and recommendations from individual interviews (see Appendix E). The researcher reread the transcripts again to ensure each participant’s voice was captured in the participant-checking document. M. Q. Patton (1980) described this checking process as one where qualitative analysts return to their data over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations make sense.

Focus Groups

The purpose of the focus group was to “actively involve participants in assessing whether the interpretations accurately represent them” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). For the focus group interviews, participants were asked to say their name before responding to aid in the transcription process. The focus group questions were designed to create dialogue among the participants and to confirm if themes and subthemes made sense and were accurate. Focus group interviews were transcribed and coded to confirm the previously stated themes, strategies, and recommendations. During the first review of the focus group transcripts, the researcher listened to the audio recording and read a printed copy of the transcript to clarify any inaudible words and to again locate and confirm the common themes, strategies, and recommendations. The researcher reread focus group transcripts for a second time to color code the themes, strategies, and recommendations previously established with sticky note tabs and markers. The researcher

employed a comparative methodology across focus group transcripts with the participant-checking document to confirm commonality in data collection.

Data Analysis and Authenticity

Creswell and Miller (2000) emphasized qualitative inquirers need to demonstrate their studies are credible. The researcher employed a triangulation method to validate the investigation. This research inquiry included individual interviews, a focus group, and member checking. Engaging in these validity procedures demonstrates the credibility of the research. Creswell and Miller (2000) further explained qualitative researchers use their lens or viewpoint not based on scores, instruments, or research designs but by using the lens of people who conduct, participate in, or read and review a study. This type of member checking is used to validate qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). At the end of each focus group, participants were given a copy of the participant-checking document. They were asked to indicate by marking with a pen (e.g., check, circle, and slash) the themes, strategies, and recommendations that resonated most with them on the participant-checking document and to write on the same document any additional themes not listed, but important to them. Creswell and Miller (2000) emphasized taking data and interpretations back to participants, so they can confirm the credibility of the information, which adds a deeper level of credibility to the research. This approach of member checking validates the voice and viewpoint of participants from whom the data were originally collected. The final process of data analysis is the final dissertation findings and presentation of the findings.

Trustworthiness and Positionality

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), the role and responsibility as the researcher is to ensure data and their interpretation are credible and trustworthy. To explain the concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the terms *credibility* and *dependability* as a mechanism to evaluate trustworthiness. In this inquiry, the informed consent form included details on the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and credibility in the study. As mentioned previously, the researcher used focus groups and member checks to gain credibility. According to Yin (2014), dependability is the replicability of the protocols of a study so another researcher can accurately recreate the study. The focus groups and participant checking document was important in establishing the dependability of this research. Lastly, to support the rigor of this inquiry, the researcher's advisor acted as an "external auditor" (Rodwell & Byers, 1997, p. 119) to ensure trustworthiness.

As a researcher intrinsically woven into this research, this researcher is a first-generation, African American woman who attended a PWI. It was important for the researcher to reflect and identify her personal background without imposing her own struggles and experiences as an undergraduate student onto this research inquiry. Creswell (2007) explained a process called bracketing is important in phenomenological research so personal experiences or interpretations will not be conflated with those of the research participants. The researcher disclosed her positionality and background to the participants, along with her curiosity in understanding their cocurricular experiences at an Ivy institution. Harris (2019) remarked how her perspective and personal experiences as a Black woman was a strength in the research process to help quickly build rapport with participants. The researcher's background and positionality provided meaning to the research. In fact, several of the participants commented they were excited to help with the

research and expressed this type of inquiry would be helpful to the Ivy culture and community.

The hope is this research inquiry will be used to continue conversations on providing intentional support and programs to first-generation, African American women students.

Limitations of the Study

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), every study has a set of limitations or potential weaknesses or problems. This research inquiry is limited in that it only addressed the cocurricular experiences of eight, first-generation, African American, women undergraduate students at one Ivy institution. The research findings are also limited to the experiences of students at Alpha University and cannot be generalized to students attending other Ivy institutions.

As a first-generation, African American woman, this research is also limited by the researcher's own biases. Harris (2019) asserted the goal in research is to understand and make meaning of participants' experiences in the context of the research and not to place a value on it according to one's background and experiences. This researcher is currently employed as a higher education administrator at an Ivy institution. Based on previous conversations with former Alpha University students, this researcher has developed her own beliefs and assumptions about challenges Black women experience on Alpha's campus. In full disclosure, since the completion of this research, this researcher has attended campus events where several of the participants were also in attendance, and the researcher has been invited to attend participants' cocurricular performances on campus.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher established the methodology and rationale for this research inquiry. The researcher outlined the phenomenological research approach, procedures, and

protocols followed to answer the research questions. This chapter included measures taken to demonstrate the credibility and trustworthiness of this research inquiry. These measures are important to establishing dependability of the research and to support the rigor of this inquiry. Ultimately, implications for this research include improving organization and program support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to navigate their collegiate experience at an Ivy institution.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Their Experiences

With all these cocurriculars, I feel like I'm enjoying my time here, and I'm actually really in love with the experience that I'm having, or the experience that I created for myself here. So, although it is a PWI, but within my community of people, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

—Kerry, study participant

The aim of this study was to understand how participants' lived experiences were influenced by cocurricular activities in a collegiate environment during their matriculation at an Ivy institution. The purpose of this chapter was to explore how eight first-generation African American women use cocurricular programs as support networks to navigate their undergraduate experience at an Ivy institution. The previous chapters focused on the rationale to examine the experiences of these women, the significant literature published on the experiences of first-generation, African American women matriculating at PWIs, findings from relevant research studies, and the methodology used in this study. Findings in this chapter emerged from participants' narratives, using their own words to describe how they managed and negotiated their experiences through their participation in cocurricular activities and programs. This researcher used a phenomenological approach to examine participants' lived experiences to understand their perspectives and feelings. The research findings and themes presented will be valuable to Ivy administrators, and the researcher will offer recommendations for beneficial and engaging ways to enhance and strengthen the collegiate experience for first-generation, African American, women students.

The themes discussed in this chapter emerged from the study's research questions and theoretical framework. The research questions of this study include:

1. How do cocurricular programs provide support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to navigate the collegiate experience at one Ivy institution?
2. What skills and strategies do first-generation, African American, women students learn and use from cocurricular programs to assist them in navigating their collegiate experience?
3. How could this Ivy institution create sense of belonging for first-generation, African American, women students through cocurricular programs?

The research questions created an opportunity for participants to give meaning to their cocurricular experiences at Alpha University.

Participant Profiles

Eight first-generation African American undergraduate women students participated in this research inquiry. Each student is referred to by a pseudonym. Names of their cocurricular activities have also been generalized or given pseudonyms.

Kerry

Kerry is a sophomore, intending to major in African American studies. Kerry is a member of Black Student Union (BSU), a dance group, a Caribbean affinity group, and a political commentary group.

Gina

Gina is a senior psychology student with minor in African American studies. Gina is involved in a Black women's affinity group, BSU, and a governance council group.

Faith

Faith is a senior studying African American studies. Faith works in an affinity space on campus, volunteers with educational equity and access programs, and has served as a mentor for students of color. She was vice president for a Black women's affinity group, and she tutors and teaches for several programs on campus.

Erica

Erica is a senior politics major and African American studies minor. Erica is a tutor for a college access program, a member of a dance group, and participated in and planned many events on campus since freshman year.

Lauren

Lauren is a junior studying one of the natural sciences. She is a member of an arts group, is a volunteer for a college access program, and participates in several other groups on campus.

Simone

Simone is a sophomore who has not declared a major. She is involved with BSU, a mentor program, a political commentary group, a dance group, and a prison educational reform group.

Maya

Maya is a senior engineering major and an African American studies and environmental studies minor. She has participated in many organizations since freshman year, including a faith-based club, a botany club, an engineering club, and various other groups on campus.

Amber

Amber is a senior majoring in African American studies. Amber has planned numerous events on campus for African American students. She cofounded a political commentary group,

is a peer educator in a campus affinity space, and has led activism and advocacy groups and initiatives since her freshman year.

A Word About the Participants

A brief word about the participants' background and motivations is necessary, as it provides insight into the findings of the study. Participants were women who self-identified as first-generation African American undergraduate students. Their personal lenses of their cocurricular experiences offer a unique perspective on how they managed, negotiated, and thrived in communities they created for themselves in the competitive, academically rigorous, and individualistic Ivy institutional setting. These women were highly motivated, academically prepared, and socially grounded.

As first-generation students, all participants referenced the influence their parents and extended family had on their decision to attend college and an Ivy institution, even though their family members had not attended college themselves. These women felt pressure to succeed and make their families proud. For example, because no one in her family finished college, Faith felt pressure to be successful. However, she stated, "It's nice to feel like I'm making my family proud." Like Faith, Gina, a senior, shared:

When [my sister] didn't finish, my parents were pretty upset with her, but they were still hopeful that me and my brother would go. Then my brother didn't go and then I went. And so, there's this pressure, I guess, for me to make sure I finish.

As first-generation students, they all mentioned generous financial aid packages offered by Alpha University and how high school participation in leadership programs for low-income, high-achieving students made attending college a reality.

These highly motivated women were busy in high school, and all recognized the importance of extracurricular activities in the college application process. These activities were

essential in their development and enhanced their learning process as students. When posed with the question, “What type of extracurricular activities were you involved in when you were in high school?,” the common response was “too many.” Erica shared:

My high school was a small charter school. I was always doing too much. In high school, I think because of the stress of trying to get to college, you feel like you need to be doing 1,000 things, and I was definitely doing 1,000 things. I didn't . . . I think I didn't get enough sleep. I slept like four or five hours a night, on average. Yeah. It was—yeah. It was not good. But all of it, I felt, was so fulfilling and satisfying and I was happy to do all of it, and I didn't realize until after I was like, wait, that was really unhealthy. How did I survive that?

These students spoke about balancing academics and extracurricular activities and how the experiences prepared them for college. When Kerry reflected on her high school activities, she said, “I did way too much I'm thinking back like wow, this is a lot of stuff, but it was all good stuff.” Kerry was on the step team and in French Club, a college prep program, a National Honor Society, field hockey, the premed society, Red Cross, math, English, and a science club. All the participants looked forward to continuing their involvement in extracurricular activities in college.

Lastly, as first-generation students, all participants mentioned the social gap that exists between them and their families now they are Ivy League students. Kerry best described this social gap as “language and mannerisms that you pick up in college, that aren't transferable at home.” Amber mentioned there are “some things that my family doesn't have the vocabulary to talk about.” Maya shared:

It feels like an odd space to be in, if that makes sense. It's almost like in a way, you shield your parents from the school because there are certain aspects of college that you're just like, oh, they won't understand.

Erica had similar sentiments when she shared:

I definitely see the effects of going to an Ivy League and being the one person in my family who has gone to an Ivy League, and that affecting how we discuss some things.

How much my parents don't know what goes on at a school like this, and how much I feel like I can and can't tell them. And how there are gaps in things that we either connect on, or things that they're just not . . . they might not be aware of or acclimated to, simply because I've been in this space and I can't bring them with me through it.

Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, and Duron (2013) observed parents who did not go to college have limited knowledge of college norms and culture, and first-generation students cannot rely on their parents to cope with identity changes as college students. Participants were connected to their parents and spoke about how their parents pushed them to attend college; however, their continued support was limited due to lack of understanding of collegiate culture. As first-generation, African American women, these students encountered challenges in their transition to the Ivy institution but credited their families for inspiring them to be “the first.”

Findings

Table 1 displays themes that emerged from research questions and the theoretical framework to support the rationale of this research study. As described in Chapter 3, the coded themes are inclusive of all participant responses. The following sections include responses from participants organized by research question and associated themes and subthemes.

Table 1

Research Question Emerging Themes

RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Cocurricular involvement	Development of skills and strategies	Creating belongingness and inclusiveness
Friendship	Professionalism	Mentoring program
Community	Leadership	Financial support
Sense of belonging	Time management	Creating inclusive spaces
Affirmation	Listening and voicing opinion	Connection to Black administrators
Self-awareness	Networking	
Mental health		
Isolation		

Cocurricular Involvement

According to Stirling and Kerr (2015), cocurricular activities are important in the enhancement of the collegiate experience. Student engagement in cocurricular activities at the collegiate level has potential to positively influence student success by providing a support network for students to navigate their matriculation. Kuh (2001) explained student participation in cocurricular programs is widely recognized and promoted as an integral part of student life experience. Cocurricular involvement can provide support to African American women who need assistance in adjusting to their campus culture and environment.

Simone responded to RQ1 saying cocurriculars were a source of support because they provided “fulfillment”. She said, “If I didn’t have these cocurriculars, I would feel really empty. I was feeling empty before. But I realized how fulfilled I felt once I found—especially my dance group and stuff.” Simone additionally added cocurriculars were important in her navigation at Alpha University:

These cocurriculars, they provide me with that community. They provide me with that base of that just mind space to get off of, not only just the work and the rigor of just being here and being in college in general, but how these laughs that we share, and like this carefreeness, and just being able to just be, doesn’t necessarily exist in other places on campus. So, I really cherish them.

Several subthemes emerged when participants were asked how cocurricular programs provide support networks to navigate their collegiate experiences at an Ivy institution. Participants indicated they found support in cocurriculars through friendships and in the community these groups fostered. They gained sense of belonging in relationships they formed with other Black women. They also found support in the affirmation they received in cocurriculars and gained self-awareness through participation. These women also found mental health support from their relationships in cocurriculars, which were important to them in

navigating their successful matriculation at Alpha University. Lastly, these women felt less isolated and supported when they participated in cocurriculars.

These women spoke about support they received from participating in cocurriculars with other Black women and first-generation women. Alpha University is a place of wealth; it can sometimes be difficult to find sense of belonging within the Black community because of classism, which leads these women to find support from Black women within their income status. Erica spoke about support she received as a first-generation student participating in cocurriculars with other African American women:

It is a source of support—one, on a surface level, is just like you go to a space where there is other people like you, and literally you can ask questions, if you're doing stuff together, if you have a class together, it's an easy way to link up and kind of find what's similar, and grow together. On a deeper level it's the support of just being in a circle of people like you, literally in terms of you feel safe, and you feel like you can just talk about whatever. You'll be listened to, you'll be heard. In a way that you can go to a bad class and have a bad experience, and then have a meeting or be organizing with people that you know that you can be safe with. It's almost, like, a sigh of relief. I feel like that's the biggest support that I've gotten.

Faith also found support in cocurriculars and felt “the cocurriculars that I take part in, it's because it's welcoming space for Black women.” Faith went on to say:

So, my dance company is very ethnically and social economically mixed, but it doesn't matter to me because there's always been a strong cohort of Black students, so I never felt like the one little drop of chocolate, in the very white mix. So, I think I've always been drawn to things where I felt affirmed in my experience, and I felt like my voice would be validated.

Kerry's statement about cocurriculars being a source of support for her as a first-generation student was perhaps the most impactful and meaningful response to RQ1. Kerry spoke passionately about support she received from participation in Black organizations:

I don't imagine diversity and inclusion on campus without these clubs. I feel like these clubs play a big role in how we interact as students. Because it is through these clubs and through these different events that we meet each other. Although we are all on the same campus, we may not all have the same schedule. Some people are closer to other people,

but when it comes down to it, when we're all at these events, we're all one. And we're all enjoying it together. We're all making memories together in a way that's not forced, but it's voluntary. And I feel like these clubs are so amazing in the way that they do that. I'm not saying that they do all of it. Of course, there's some work that you have to do on your own, but I'm thinking that they provide that space. They provide that access that we need in order to kind of grow here in a Black community on campus.

From a different perspective, Gina spoke about participating in cocurriculars with only two or three other African American students to ensure Black students are represented in organization decision-making and are aware of resources available on campus. Gina shared:

A lot of times, I feel like I have to be the voice, even though no one's asking me to be the voice of any community, I do feel it helps to always put that extra voice out there or else it will go or be brushed under the table as though everyone has the same experience on campus.

Unlike most participants in this study, Gina participated in cocurriculars, because she had an interest in an activity or organization, but not as a source of support. She stated, "In terms of support, I think my main thing is going to my friends." Navigating the Ivy experience for first-generation, African American women and the multiple loyalties they balance in PWI environments is not easy, and cocurricular experiences were supportive spaces.

Friendship

Black women form lasting friendships and find community in sister circle spaces through their involvement in cocurricular activities. According to Croom et al. (2017), Black women friendships in counter-spaces or safe spaces occupied by underrepresented student groups is where these women explore their identity and respond to negative experiences with microaggressions and an oppressive campus climate. In the focus group interview, participants were asked about support they received from their friendships in cocurriculars. Faith remarked, "If I have nothing else at Alpha University, I have Black girls on this campus. So that's sort of been an anchor for me the entire time that I've been here." Faith also spoke about the difficulties

of being a Black woman at Alpha University and how her friends in clubs and organizations were her support network:

[My Black girls] that love you and are always standing behind you, because it's really hard out here. It's tough out here. And I think it's nice, not only do they remind me of good things about myself, but also being able to do that for them and being community with each other. And just create the support network, has taught me ways to be better to myself, but also to be better to other people.

Erica spoke fervently about her friendship experience:

I feel I can only describe it as—it feels like you go through your day wearing all these hats like you have to do this. You have to be this type of person in this class. You have to be on the defense in this class because you know people will come for you. You just have to be different parts of yourself and wear different hats. Then when you're with your close friends who understand you on a different level outside of Alpha University stuff, it feels like you don't have to wear any of those hats. It feels like you could just, "All right, let me just let my hair down," and you don't have to put on an act in any case when they're your real friends. And I feel like that aids my success here because without that I think I would have a breakdown.

Faith became tearful when she spoke about her friends and the sister circle of friendship these women created for themselves:

Because as Black women who are high achievers at a place like this, you always feel like, oh I need to be perfect all the time. Twice as hard, for half as much. And that's really tough, because you're only one person who can only do so much. So, I think for me, as my friends reminding me that, yes, I'm amazing and super accomplished and very intelligent and I forget that about myself a lot. But even if I weren't, they would still care about me, which is just so moving, I think. And yeah, I'm tearing up. Wow, that's ugly.

These women shared most of their cocurricular activities were in created sister circle spaces, which were supportive, motivating, and instrumental to their success.

Cocurricular organizations were a source of support for these participants, they gained friendships and a sister circle connection, meaning a group that centers race and gender with other Black women to use as a mechanism to navigate their marginalized identities in PWI spaces (Croom et al., 2017). Participants' compelling dialogue supports research by Croom et al. (2017), who posited Black women feel safe and supported at both an institutional and

interpersonal level by organizing sister circle spaces. It is important for these women to find and create spaces where they connect with other women, who look like them to become engaged in the campus community and have meaningful cocurricular experiences.

Community and Sense of Belonging

As Strayhorn (2019) explained, positive peer interactions increase students' sense of belonging, and sense of belonging leads to student success. Finding community and sense of belonging for college students is important as they navigate their collegiate experience.

McMillian and Chavis (1986) defined community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). These African American women found community and created spaces through cocurricular activities, which influenced their feelings of connectedness at Alpha University. When asked in the focus group, “Can you share how being in community and having sense of belonging in cocurriculars is important to you as a first-generation, African American woman?” the dialogue between Simone and Faith focused on the real meaning of community. Simone remarked:

All of my extracurricular activities revolve around creating a space, particularly a safe space for Black people, period. So, whether that's through mentorship with the recent program I started or the Black Student Union or through my African dance group, they all tend to cater towards the Black experience. Whether that's through the arts or whether that's through just having food and chilling, or whether that's trying to get deeper into understandings of our health and what's important for us. Because our experiences are inevitably different than other people in the world. So, I think in that sense, it's been really important because [cocurriculars] helped me find internal peace.

FAITH: I think Alpha University and just institutions and structures like this are so isolating, in a very particular way. Like the emphasis on personal achievement, being a super successful student and doing a thousand things at one time. And having the sense that you do it all yourself, a sense of individualism, which I think for a lot of people coming from Black families, across the diaspora, that's a weird concept of not leaning on other people. Not leaning on the community. I don't know if that's true for everyone, but it's true for me. So, I think just being in community and having to actively carve out that

community for myself, especially with the Black and Brown on this campus, has been really important to me. Because in a place that can be very isolating and very lonely, I know I always have those people to return to, which is very comforting.

African American students need to create community and have sense of belonging to support their psychological well-being (Cruwys et al., 2014). Sense of belonging is important to first-generation students who have a harder time fitting into campus life and may not have felt they belonged (Weber, 2016). These students need to feel they are important and connected to campus. Cocurricular activities provided the participants with the support and affirmation they needed to negotiate their campus experience.

Affirmation

As these participants managed their multiple identities in the PWI setting, they relied on friend groups and cocurriculars to affirm their womanness and blackness. Affirmation is important for African American women because they may feel overwhelmed, discouraged, and underprepared for the Ivy experience. As supported by the literature, Black feminist thought is important in assisting Black college women to effectively gain a voice and understanding to express their experiences as marginalized students and learn how to affirm each other as marginalized students (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). These women learned to use their voice to affirm each other in cocurricular spaces. Simone explained, “We have a Black woman’s appreciation day, it’s nice because it’s just a place for Black girls to get together and talk with other Black girls on campus. Also, just to talk about just growing into ourselves in general.”

Faith spoke about participating in cocurriculars, because they were a welcoming space for Black women. She shared she felt affirmed and validated in Black spaces, “So, I think I’ve always been drawn to things where I felt affirmed in my experience and I felt like my voice

would be validated. That's one of the reasons I'm not in any other clubs." When speaking about affirmation she received from cocurriculars, Kerry expressed:

I feel like being around such amazing talented [Black] women that are like me, it's so inspirational. Back in my high school it was maybe like five of us who were actually going for colleges, going for higher education, really pushing for it. But then coming here and meeting all these wonderful Black women who have the same goals, or who have similar passions, who have similar drives, it's just very empowering to be around so many people who you can see yourself in, even though that is of a minority here, but it's still enough for me to be encouraged and to be empowered.

Simone poetically spoke of her affirming experiences:

I think having been able to go back into a boardroom, seeing fellow Black women, and we're just discussing things to do on this campus, it's really some boss shit! You don't see that anywhere else. It's really nice. It's really reaffirming. And then going into my dance group—even though I hate choreographing, it's so stressful. But it's so fun. It's just four Black girls and then the group grows, of course—if people decide to be in your piece. We're just sitting there dancing, listening to African music, discovering more about ourselves. We laugh when we do the moves stupid or ugly, or whatever. We may get at each other's necks during when we're practicing 'till three in the morning for the show. But it's fun, it's reaffirming. It's like we're free and dance is such a form of therapy. It really allows you to learn so much about yourself, because a lot can be said about you and your personality through your movements.

Participants spoke about needing affirmation from other Black women in their sister circles and cocurricular activities to help them stay positive, while navigating their multiple identities in a challenging environment.

Self-Awareness

According to Porter and Dean (2015), African American women at PWIs must learn how to negotiate their multiple identities and recognize how those identities shape their interactions and relationships with other students. Participants spoke about managing their multiple identities (race and gender) at Alpha University through their self-awareness as Black women. Participants knew they were Black—they were raised in Black homes with Black families, some attended predominantly Black high schools—but when they arrived at Alpha University, they

immediately *knew* they were Black. Alpha University has a complicated history of slavery, legacy, and wealth displayed in campus pictures and on buildings; therefore, participants were reminded of their blackness every day. Black feminist theory was used in this study as a construct to acknowledge Black women's historical struggle against the multiple oppressions these participants experience. Simone shared:

I think [cocurriculars] have made me more aware. I think they have helped me in turn know how to navigate being in spaces like Alpha or being in white spaces. Because through these cocurricular activities I met a lot of older students, or even alumni in some cases who have the same feelings that I have, and have literally walked the path that I'm walking now. So, I feel like these cocurricular activities have connected me with people who have taught me that this is not how the rest of your life has to be. And even though this is the way this space in, and we can't necessarily change, especially not overnight, you can and you will make it through here. So just knowing that I can, it just makes every day more bearable.

Kerry explained her self-awareness as follows, "...loving Black identity, and loving the way that my body curves, and the way that my hair kinks. So, in that way, I feel like I'm very vocal about my identity as a Black woman." As Amber reflected on race and gender, her statement was echoed by several participants. Her involvement in cocurriculars is based on her self-awareness as a Black woman. She stated, "I was Black before I came to Alpha University, but I was *Black* when I got to Alpha University. Like, you feel it here. You know you are [Black], you can't pretend like you're not." Amber felt ostracized at Alpha during the election of the current administration and was aware her Black identity made her feel discomfort, but cocurriculars gave her and her friend group the opportunity to "be involved in something that's going to help relieve some of that for me and for others." Lastly, Lauren described her self-awareness as the only student of color in a performing arts group. She hesitantly shared, "I was literally the only person of color in that one, and so I had to drop that." Even though she liked the cocurricular and liked being involved with this group, she explained, "I just felt like I stuck out there." Fhagen-Smith et

al. (2010) emphasized Black women students often experience the need to work to balance their multiple identities to thrive in PWI environments.

These students shared they were hyperaware of their blackness at this Ivy, causing them to gain a deeper understanding of their self-awareness and the intersections of their race and gender, which helped them navigate their matriculation process. Black feminist theory was used to interpret experiences of students. In support of the literature, Mitchell (2016) found Black feminist thought contributed a theoretical lens for African American women to be heard and to add meaning to their experiences. Additionally, Martin (1993) explained Black feminism is a creative space in life where Black women exist within two realities: Black and woman. Black feminism is used to acknowledge the common struggles of Black women with the intent to accurately represent and validate their experiences by examining their lives (Few, 2007).

Mental Health

Mental health was a reoccurring subtheme in the findings. Each participant spoke about how their involvement in cocurricular activities was the source of their mental health survival at Alpha University. Amber shared cocurriculars are important to how she functions as a student by saying, “I think my involvement in cocurriculars just effected my mental health in a positive way has made me feel as though I have a purpose made me feel as though I have community and communion.” Kerry stressed the importance of mental health by participating in an organization with her friend who started the group on Black health issues on campus. Kerry was experiencing some feelings and did not quite know how to manage them, and the health group helped her work through the issues. Now Kerry participates with this cocurricular to help other Black students become more cognizant of their mental health issues—to learn how to work through them like she was able to do.

While most dialogue was about how cocurriculars positively affected their mental health, several participants spoke about how their participation in cocurriculars had a negative effect on their mental health. When participants were asked to talk about how mental health was an important part of their participation in cocurriculars, the dialogue became engaging, and the researcher saw the importance of cocurricular programs and activities. Simone answered first:

This just goes back to, I'm a very private person. So, when you're at a space that's really isolating, it can be really easy to get wrapped up in your thoughts or what you have going on. But my extracurriculars really—they forced me to get outside of my dorm. They forced me to talk. I could be in the worst mood ever, and not want to talk, and then I get around the people in my club, and they start having you laughing, or they notice your mood is off. And they really do genuinely care about you, and they make you talk, or they make you feel more comfortable, or at least me. So, I think that my extracurriculars are honestly the reason that I am staying at this institution, and if I didn't involve myself with them—if I didn't meet so many amazing people who have impacted my life in so many profound ways, then I would not be able to make it. So even though they do get a little tiring, besides that, they really do give me something to look forward to, they really do. They come with people who genuinely care about you, sometimes more than you care about yourself.

Maya also shared she has been in cocurricular spaces that had a negative impact on her mental health. In agreement with other participants, Maya hesitantly added:

I've definitely had some [cocurriculars] where I felt like they were detrimental to my mental health, at points. I was laughing because she knows [gesturing to Lauren]. No, but I just think exactly what you said, that there are some instances where you don't realize that extracurriculars, if they don't have people who look like you or are similar to you, and different demographics too, they can tend to weigh on you—these are spaces that you actively have sought out because you think that they could help with your mental health, but sometimes they just hinder it. So, it goes both ways.

There was a great deal of reflection and conversation about the negative impact cocurriculars had on their mental health. Simone spoke very candidly about her stressful experience in the entrepreneurship club, and Maya, Gina, and Faith did not hesitate to share their experiences during this passionate dialogue:

SIMONE: It's so common for people to think that Black women don't have feelings or something like that. So, a lot of the time, if they ever had any problem that they wanted to

raise up, they would look to me to bring it up. And I'm like, "Why do you all want me to be the person taking all the bullets?" You feel me? And then, it was just a lot of stress culture. Definitely didn't fulfill me or add to my life, so I don't know. I don't count those things as extracurriculars. On my resume even, or when people ask me what I do on campus, there are certain three or four things that I will always say. And I—the other things I do, because they don't fulfill me in the same ways, or because they don't positively impact my mental health in those same ways, I don't even bother bringing them up. I go, and I'm kind of just passive when I'm there. I do what I have to do, but I'm definitely more involved and more present in the ones that fulfill me and benefit my mental health.

MAYA: I feel like that's also—this is an issue that, I don't know how to phrase it, but that's also an issue at the same time. There are these spaces that you actively seek out, and you actively want to be a part of, yet if you think about it, you can't be a part of it. And in order for you to deal with it, you bury it. And I agree with you. There are so many things on campus where I might have tried it out or been a part of, and I didn't even talk about it because it might have been a negative experience, or maybe you just don't want to mess with it anymore. But I feel like it's also an issue because it's not like you left that space because you just felt like it was time for me to move on. You left that space because you felt uncomfortable in that space. And that's—yeah.

GINA: Kind of related to that, I feel like some of my extracurriculars, I've stated because I felt like they're not the most representative groups that they could be. And I feel like I'm providing some representation even if that's a bit detrimental to me. And I guess it's into choosing your battles, and is this one worth fighting?

FAITH: I will say for me though, part of the mental health piece in extracurriculars is just like emotional regulation I feel like. I'm also a dancer. And so, for me, there's just this feeling that there's all this energy. You have all these thoughts going around, being at Alpha University. And I just have to create something or make something out of that and get it out of me. So, I feel like for me, it's just an outlet basically, essentially, because I think if I had to deal with all those things by myself in one way, it would be too heavy. But it's nice to get out and talk to people and interact with people and make art with them in a way that I feel like is a way to decompress almost. But then when you're in those spaces, everybody asking the Black girl to be the warrior princess. Like leave me alone! I'm just trying to get my degree!

The participants expressed the importance of taking care of their mental and physical health and overall well-being in an isolating environment. Several participants mentioned they were able to recognize when other Black women in their activities seemed stressed or disengaged. They used their cocurricular involvement as an opportunity to check-in with each other and ensure any mental health issues or concerns were addressed.

Isolation

Isolation was the last emerging subtheme for RQ1, which many of participants discussed they experienced at Alpha University. Their involvement in cocurriculars was instrumental in coping with isolation, as they navigated their collegiate experience. Several women spoke about not expecting this isolation. After all, they had seen pictures on Alpha's website showing a diverse campus environment, but the actual campus had a different culture, which pictures could not capture. Lauren felt isolated as the only person of color in her performing arts group, sharing:

My freshman year, the only thing that I knew that I wanted to do was join the group, because that's what I've always loved doing. So, it's like that isolating aspect there [in the group]. And then as I got involved in more extracurriculars, they kind of reminded me that there are other people here, that there is a space here that supports me.

Erica, a graduating senior, mentioned how she recently started to think about her experiences at Alpha and recounted, "Cocurriculars and just being in certain spaces has allowed me to feel less isolated and feel less lonely in my experience of Alpha University. But I also think that sometimes it's been a band-aid." Faith, also a senior, discussed isolation:

It's tough being at Alpha I think because it's just, really white, and so being a Black woman, being a darker skinned, Black woman, being just a student from not a legacy family, all those things would've combined to make me feel isolated on this campus.

As first-generation, African American students, there was also an unexpected aspect of isolation within the Black culture on campus. Kerry shared how not being wealthy was socially isolating:

So even within the Black community here on campus, there are very affluent Black people here as well. So being first-gen and low income even in the Black community can be a little isolating, being that they know people as well. So as much as I used to love thinking that going to a PWI meant that there are going to be a lot of rich White people, there are a lot of rich Black people too. So, it's like coming to terms that you don't fit into any of those boxes, so you don't check any of those boxes. So, I feel like I don't fit in socially, but I'm a social person. So, I can, you know, that doesn't hinder me from talking to whoever I need to talk to, or engaging in conversation with anyone—but I have to make space for myself. So, it's not that I'm already included in the conversation, I make myself included in the conversation. So that's an interesting part of being here on campus.

Faith explained the Black culture dynamics by saying:

The Black community here is very interesting because, it's segmented by race, or by ethnic identity, rather. So, you have either first-gen or second-generation students who are like sons and daughters of immigrants from the Continent, you have Caribbean people who might be in a similar situation, you have Black American people, all of that. And on top of that, it's also stratified by class, so I often felt being Black-American, and being a woman, and being from a low-income background, I just couldn't connect to a lot of the Black people on campus. That said, I think, people within the community are trying to make it better. I have been involved in some of the Black orgs here, on the board, and just trying to make sure it's welcoming for all Black people from all walks of life. So, it's not easy, and I definitely think part of the reason that I have been able to find, sort of joy on campus is because it's not like the end of my existence, so I try not to let it consume my entire identity.

The participants experienced isolation in cocurricular activities, in the classroom, and within the Black community at Alpha University. However, their sister circle cocurricular participation were their supportive networks.

Participants also spoke about how isolated they would feel at Alpha University if they did not have their cocurricular activities. Erica spoke about preparing to study abroad one semester. She did not want to commit to any cocurriculars or long-term projects, and her time was boring and isolating. She described that time as:

The most inactive I have been since being at Alpha, and it was boring. It was just really boring, and it was also a little bit isolating because I knew that I couldn't invest myself in something, so that meant that I'm not going to meetings, I'm not showing up for events as much. I'm literally preparing to leave—I'm applying for stuff, packing, doing a lot of things that didn't allow me to truly be in a community the way that I was so used to being, so it was a little isolating and boring. Yeah. I did have a lot more extra time though, but yeah.

These participants did not consider isolation would be an issue for them at Alpha University, especially in cocurricular participation. However, sometimes as the only Black student in a cocurricular activity, isolation was imminent. These students relied on involvement in

cocurricular activities within the counter-spaces they created for themselves as a source of support to enhance their collegiate experience.

Development of Skills and Strategies

Student involvement in cocurricular programs is an integral part of the collegiate experience (Kuh, 2001). Skills and strategies participants receive through their cocurricular participation complement and enrich their academic experience, as they successfully navigate their educational experience. According to Chickering (1969), the college years represent a time in which students are engaged in a dynamic search for identity. Participants in this research study spoke confidently about how cocurricular participation added value to their Ivy League education. Simone spoke about the power of the Ivy name and how her cocurricular experiences will benefit her beyond Alpha University:

It doesn't matter what I do here. I could have been the worst student ever, but that name [Alpha University] and just the fact that so few people [who] are able to penetrate this exclusive bubble, they already think that I'm better than them when they hear that name. I feel like the power in that is unmatched, and that's why I'm here, that's why so many other students are here. And I know that this name is going to carry me far. I know that these experiences now are going to take me to so many different places.

Similarly, Amber explained:

I've learned a lot about how to engage in a way that is genuine, authentic, and truthful to myself and still be calm, elegant, and respectful, and I think that that is the valuable knowledge that you don't learn in other places.

Erica shared, "Alpha is more than just an academic institution," and further described Alpha as a place where students are well connected and have learned how to pull resources from different places. She stated if you are "doing Alpha well, you are involved in a thousand things." Several subthemes emerged when participants shared skills and strategies they gained from cocurricular involvement to assist them in navigating their collegiate experience.

Professionalism and Leadership

Two participants mentioned they learned professionalism through cocurricular experiences. Maya mentioned, “I think that I gained things professionally and career wise, but I don’t think academically I gained a lot, just because [cocurriculars] take a lot of time.” Simone also stated she learned professional skills in cocurriculars but added:

I can say [I gained] academically in terms of the experiences that I’ve had and the awakenings that I’ve had because of the differences between these cocurricular types, and then the experiences that I have in Alpha at large, or like the world at large, definitely has informed me.

The professional skills learned in cocurriculars were also useful in the classroom. Participants used these skills to manage their marginalized identity and isolation in academic settings.

Participants discussed the theme of learning leadership skills from cocurriculars. Maya explained in her individual interview:

I think what I’ve learned for myself [in cocurriculars] is leadership skills. I didn’t have leadership and organizational skills. I did not even know how much I was struggling in terms of organization before I joined clubs. It just taught me more about how you should structure certain things for example, if you’re writing meeting notes and how should you structure that, or how the plan for an event, how to properly allocate your time, things like that. That was really, really beneficial.

In the group interview, Kerry commented about learning leadership skills from cocurriculars through the day-to-day operations of an organization:

I feel like a different challenge comes up every day here at this campus. I don’t know if it’s particularly in the Black groups, but there’s always something going on. There’s always something that is last minute. There’s always something that is, “Oh, funding didn’t come through,” or, “Oh, we need to run and get this, run and get that.” So, it becomes like skills of delegating, skills of organizing, skills of talking to people, and being persuasive, and knowing how to present yourself. And it’s just like connecting with different people to know what to use and how to use it. So, it’s just a lot of being in clubs. And also, reaching out and tapping into all these different resources that I didn’t actually do growing up. So, everything that I needed to do was just there, and I did it. But being in these clubs you have to learn how to multitask, and you have to learn how to reach into different facets and think broadly. It’s so much more than just attending a meeting. It’s so much more, and you learn so much, in my opinion.

Participants recognized learning professionalism and leadership enhanced their cocurricular engagement. In support of the literature, Stirling and Kerr (2015) explained cocurricular programs are widely promoted as an integral part of the student life experience. Cocurricular involvement also provides a framework for connecting students to matriculation success and engagement on campus (Strayhorn, 2019).

Time Management

Time management was a common strategy participants learned and used from cocurricular activities to help them navigate their collegiate experience. Lauren commented cocurriculars helped her manage her time and gave her confidence. Lauren also made a comment in the focus group about skills learned in cocurriculars, and participants agreed with her:

I think all these skills are really important to learn through extracurriculars, especially because coming in first-gen African American female. I don't know if other people can relate to this, but you feel behind the curve. I feel like a lot of people have already had these skills set up. They have seen parents and whoever else, have instilled this in them, because they have the experience of what that's like. So, you kind of feel behind the curve coming in without these set of skills. So, having the extracurriculars and the space to learn that here, I feel like was really important.

Kerry enthusiastically explained she learned:

Time management, 100%! Not to say that I didn't know how to manage my time, but I didn't have a very healthy balance of socials and academics. And now that I'm participating in all these cocurriculars and I'm having that balance, I find myself happier, or more willing to do work.

Erica spoke about learning time management and the art of delegation:

At this point I think, yeah, time management and learning how to delegate things well. And learning how to use people's talents to the best of their ability, or putting people in the right roles so like don't put a very shy person in the role of having to communicate with a bunch of other groups. Learning how to organize people I think is a big skill that I've learned from that.

These students understood the value and importance of their out-of-the-classroom experiences and used those experiences to develop a skill set that would benefit them beyond Alpha University.

Listening and Voicing Opinion

Through organizational activities, these women found their voices or expressed their views and learned the strategy of listening. Faith spoke about learning to voice her opinion when she commented:

I've been on the boards; I've been an officer in several organizations—I was on the executive board of my dance team. So, I think those [leadership positions] helped me for speaking up for myself in large group settings.

Gina also explained:

I think the biggest strategy [learned] is not being afraid to speak up if something is bothering me because there have been instances of that and many times if I say something or let someone know that's bothering me, they'll try and correct their behavior. And I think that has showed me in other parts of my life if something feels off, I should say something because there's a chance the person doesn't know what they're doing is problematic or making me uncomfortable.

In the focus group, Kerry shared her perspective on how listening was a skill learned from cocurriculars:

I always thought I was a good listener until I realized I was only listening to voices. So, being in extracurricular activities taught me to listen to body movements, sighs, facial expressions, and changes in behavior. It's not an "in a moment" thing but it's a continuous thing, so you can notice when your friend is depressed in body to skin. And being in those curriculars helped me pick up on little things about body language, and little things about whether or not they're wearing this. Like, I'd noticed that my friend stopped wearing her necklace, and I was like, "Oh, what happened?" And she was like, "Oh, I was very upset, and I was going through something, and I ripped it off my neck." So, having that ability to be around people and have that community to notice little things. I was always like, "Oh, I'm a listener, I'm a listener," until I truly realized listening was more than your ears. You actually have to pay attention to things around you.

ERICA: And something that you said, oh, about listening. I think in being in different groups, it's not enough to just know what the problem is or to be aware of what's going

on. I realize that it's not enough to be able to articulate why people feel a certain type of way. It's like—Okay, so what are you going to do about it? You see there's a vacancy, you see there's a vacuum in what people want and what people need. And in a distance, they're seeing what you can do and what they need. How are you going to fill that? And I think that's something that I continuously work on and feel like I am getting better and better at, rather than providing what I think people might like or what people might need, and more so actually doing a good job of that and bridging that gap between people. So, I'm seeing it particularly about underclassmen and not knowing exactly how to adjust what they need or to be self-aware of what I can provide in positions of leadership in different groups. And it being more than just listening and knowing what the problem might be, and more so like—Okay, so as a leader what can I actually do about this and carrying those steps out.

Participants learned to listen and voice their opinions through positive out-of-the-classroom peer interactions. The skills learned are important to navigating challenging spaces because Black women can be perceived as independent and aggressive (Rosales & Person, 2003).

Networking

Lastly, networking was a skill learned from cocurricular involvement. Simone shared:

Just in terms of networking, you meet people who have ties to this campus or connections to this campus but may not necessarily be on this campus. I had the opportunity to go to like my first concert with one of these girls in my dance group. And she knew this other Black girl at Penn, it's a whole network that you get exposed to once you're in these cocurriculars.

Kerry explained networking in terms of providing job security after graduation. She stated:

So, knowing that after this, I'll have something. So, not to say that this Alpha degree is the end all be all, because I know that I'm talented, but just the Alpha name opens up doors that I didn't even know were possible.

Participants identified the importance of networking as first-generation students. Although they experienced and managed many challenges at Alpha University, learning the art of networking with alumni and other professionals, is an instrumental part of their future after graduation.

These women spoke about finding fulfillment in cocurricular activities and learning to navigate their current Ivy environment and life beyond Alpha University. Simone was thinking of life after Ivy when she shared:

So, I feel like these cocurricular activities have connected me with people who have taught me that this is not how the rest of your life has to be. And even though this is the way this space is [now], and we can't necessarily change it, especially not overnight, you can, and you will make it through here. So just knowing that I can [make it], it just makes every day more bearable.

Erica also spoke about the intersections of her Black womanness and what she has learned through cocurriculars, when she spoke about her horizons after Alpha University:

I think, yeah, that's something that I've learned here that, I mean, this might have to do with just Black women just in general feeling like they have to be everything, but I feel like the Black women here are everything. They're just so fire. In terms of like academics, their goals, where they want to be, how big their horizons are outside of Alpha University. Alpha University, for them, is not the pinnacle of where they're going to be. They already see way past here. Not that it's nothing, but this is just one step on the way to whatever is next, therefore they don't tend to get caught up in the stuff that a lot of students here do. So, that means, honestly, we have a different way of dressing, and we have a different way of carrying ourselves, the things that we do that, to me, is so beautiful and special, that we're able to almost like cultivate and contain it in a way that's like—It almost feels like parallel to general Alpha University culture. And so, it's like, "Yeah, we're smart." Yeah. I mean, we're all smart. We're here. But it's also like, "Yeah, my hair looks great, and I'm successful, and I'm traveling, and I'm learning how to cook, and I have a YouTube channel," and you're doing so much. And I think it's just manifesting in beautiful ways in every person.

AMBER: And it's really like those cocurriculars that are kind of the driver, like a reason for everybody to come together. You know what I mean?

The women's involvement and participation in cocurriculars are an important part of their successful collegiate navigation as first-generation African American students at an Ivy League institution. The skills and strategies they learned from cocurricular activities ranged from leadership development, confidence, and commitment, to time management and academic/activity life balance.

The rich conversations and dialogue in the interviews and focus groups are important, as these first-generation, African American women navigate their Ivy success through the lens of cocurricular programs. In support of the literature, these women made meaning of their cocurricular participation and found sense of belonging on PWI campuses through their

cocurricular involvement. According to Dortch and Patel (2017), African American women gain sense of belonging through cocurricular involvement, which enhances their overall well-being and levels of success.

Creating Belongingness and Inclusiveness

Strayhorn (2019) explained there is a positive relationship between involvement in academic and social activities and students' belonging in college. Adjusting in an unfamiliar college environment can be challenging for any student, but Black women often "feel a heightened sense of difficulty as members of two minoritized populations: Black and women" (Miller, 2017, p. 159). Creating an inclusive campus climate where all students feel sense of belonging is essential for the successful navigation of college students. However, when African American women are placed in a negative, hostile, and unsupportive campus climate, their sense of belonging, academic performance, and persistence to graduate is affected by feelings of isolation and a lack of attachment to the community (Johnson et al., 2007). The subthemes for RQ3 were (a) mentorship programs, (b) financial support, (c) intentionality in creating more inclusive cocurricular spaces for all students at Alpha University based on lack of cultural inclusiveness in clubs and organizations, and (d) the need for more Black administrators who are connected to students.

Several participants mentioned they did not have sense of belonging at Alpha University as a first-generation, African American woman, and they did not fit into the elite culture on the campus. Amber described her sense of belonging perspective as:

I think in some ways that is attractive to the people who do fit into the culture here. I think that that makes ... in the way that I don't fit in, I think people try to fit me in any way. And so, do I feel a sense of belonging on this campus? No. But do I feel exoticized or placed on a pedestal in some regard or made out to be something different or new—because she doesn't look like Alpha University or because she comes from this, this or that and she's open about it. I think in social realms, a lot of the time it translates into like

really patronizing attitudes about like who I am or where I come from in an attempt to make me feel like I fit into the culture or belong.

Maya shared a similar perspective when she stated:

Throughout my Alpha experience I've received many microaggressions that I don't really care for. I think that's why I tend to end up in spaces where I see people who look like me and are me because I just don't want to deal with that. And I realize that not a lot of people are aware of the microaggressions or the small little, racist or sexist or weird things that they say or do.

Responses to RQ3 focused on recommendations participants shared would give them sense of belonging at Alpha University through cocurricular activities.

Sense of belonging through cocurricular programs is important in creating an inclusive culture. Strayhorn (2019) further explained, when students devoted physical and psychological energy to become involved, their identities, interests, and values were affirmed through structured mentoring programs. Seven participants recommended a mentoring experience exclusively for African American women to create sense of belonging into their cocurricular and Ivy experience. Participants mentioned existing organizational structures at Alpha University for first-generation and low-income students did not address the intersections of their blackness and womanness.

Mentoring Program

Rosales and Person (2003) explained mentoring programs are viewed as an effective means of empowerment and support for student persistence and retention. Mentoring programs that include engagement with African American faculty, higher education administrators, and alumni can be a source of support for African American women (Rosales & Person, 2003).

Participants in this research inquiry acknowledged the importance of having African American women mentors and administrators to support their collegiate experience at Alpha University.

Gina explained:

So, I guess [I need] just intentional [mentoring]. The [mentoring] group just trying to be intentional about creating spaces or encouraging African American, first-gen women to get to know each other and find community with each other.

Faith indicated a mentoring program would help to support African American women:

I think more directly, targeted mentorship programs that are supporting women in a more direct way. It often feels like students have to push for basic things like having our heritage months funded well. And, I don't even know if its extracurriculars, I think there's just something fundamentally about the structure of the university that has all these stop-gap, band-aid measures about making students feel more welcome. But when you get to the basis of it, it's numbers, there aren't that many of us, so it's hard to make people feel like they're welcome when you don't let more than 500 of us in, for the entirety of the undergraduate population.

Amber recommended a structured mentoring program when she shared:

I think a detailed, organized, and robust mentorship program would be key to helping Black girls find community and feel that they are walking into community when they stepped foot on this campus. I think as upperclassmen, we have learned so much about how to navigate the system and I've learned the hard truths that people don't want to talk about as well as the really positive, vibrant, happy moments. We've kind of walked through it all here and I think having a mentorship program that is not something that's like a, we meet once every 2 months and you might have a mentor—you know something that's structured with a curriculum. Something that really engages and connects.

Maya recommended a STEM mentoring for African American women when she spoke:

There should definitely be a place where Black women in STEM can just discuss all the crazy things because . . . or even just women of color in STEM, because I feel this STEM departments here on campus, I've heard a lot of terrible things about them . . . But it's just in terms of making females uncomfortable or not feel supportive and things like that. And unfortunately, I feel we don't speak about it on campus. And when I speak with my friends about speaking about it, they're just like, "Oh no, don't do that." Almost like, I think the big issues for a lot of us we're obviously concerned about our degrees. I need my degree and I need my job afterwards. So, it's like I can't really afford to be creating a whole protest or something like that. And so, I think that that is necessary, just the place where woman of color in STEM can feel supportive, can feel heard without feeling like they're going to be penalized for it.

In the group session, participants were comfortable and open to share their perspectives on a mentoring program for African American women. Simone added:

A mentorship program that could really benefit first-gen, Black women would prioritize not only our identities, but also how unique we are. So, it wouldn't just be like they

would have this one Black woman who's a doctor, and then one Black woman who's this, one Black woman who's that, because there are so many different types of doctors. There are so many different types of Black people, so of course, if my only point of reference is a Black, woman doctor who comes from a whole family of doctors, that's going to be different if I'm a Black woman who's trying to be a doctor but doesn't necessarily have those people in my family who also had that experience. So just making sure that there are multiple points of references of Black women within fields, especially ones that aren't known to be very racially diverse, would be what the mentorship program could also offer. And then just real people, who really care about the mentees that they're getting, as opposed to just wanting to boost their ego or maybe get a tax write off or something like that. I know just as much as you want professional advice—I'm so sorry. I'm chatting. Just as much as you want professional advice, you want somebody that cares about you and your mental health and just who you are as a person, so yeah. Oh also, I know it is exclusionary, but I need for the mentors to be Black, female and first-gen, period. Because I've had so many experiences where people tried to mentor me, but they weren't Black, female, or first-gen, and their mentorship just hurt more than it helped. I've literally had people tell me, for example, mentorship in terms of engineering and my opportunities. I've had people tell me, "Oh, but you're a Black woman, so you'll get it. They want you. You know, they need that diversity."

Participants agreed mentoring relationships are important to their success as African American women. Many institutions offer mentoring programs, but they are not specifically designed to encourage and empower first-generation, African American women. Recognizing the diverse experiences and needs of African American women in college should lead administrators to create stronger support networks and opportunities, and to establish new programs to meet their needs (Rosales & Person, 2003).

These students need to see administrators in leadership positions who look like them and can serve as mentors to them. According to Porter and Dean (2015), African American women students find value in the support and trust of administrators and faculty members, who genuinely care about their well-being, success, and overall identity development. As an effective means of empowerment and a way to support African American women, mentoring programs lead to student persistence and retention (Munford, 1996). In fact, administrators would be invaluable role models and mentors to students. As more African American women attend Ivy

Leagues, universities have the responsibility to support these women students, as they make meaning of and develop their identities (Porter & Dean, 2015).

Financial Support

Participants expressed the need for financial support from cocurricular programs. Several participants reflected, as freshmen, they were part of a first-generation, low income program, but were not able to continue to participate due to the program's point system requirements to attend campus events. They were unable to attend the events and meet program requirements, because they were low-income students who had to work, and they felt the program did not consider their financial status. Their recommendation was for an African American, first-generation program that had financial support. Amber solemnly acknowledged:

The first thing that I needed was financial support and I'm grateful to the university for paying most of my stuff. But the burden of coming to campus and then just to be kind of left to my own devices left me to work two jobs. I work over 40 hours a week and that's on top of all these extracurriculars. The cocurriculars that I did, financial help would have been really nice. I remember my freshman year; I think Quest Bridge students got like a \$500 stipend and it helped me pay for my bedding, and I was so grateful. I didn't know where that money was going to come from.

Erica also indicated the need for financial assistance in cocurricular programs "I think the university doesn't account—sometimes doesn't account for the [financial] difficulties of doing so, of like how hard it can be as a first-generation woman of color wanting to participate in all these things."

As a concern, Gina reflected on a lack of communication between current cocurricular groups on campus and the need for financial assistance. When addressing her intersections and low-income status, she stated:

But I don't think there is a lot of communication between groups on campus to help with the intersection identity because on one hand, I'm Black but then on the other hand I'm a woman, and then a first-gen. So, when it comes to financial things finding, I guess, a safe haven or some sort with the Alpha Association of Black Women isn't a thing. Because if

there's a shirt or something that costs \$15 or something that you have to pay for, it's like, who do I complain to? Or try and talk to about assistance—or that connection, a lot of times isn't made.

Participants were not sure how to solve the need for financial assistance, although they mentioned first-generation students at other PWI institutions were provided stipends to supplement their program participation.

First-generation low-income students tend to struggle with needing financial support to attend college and to manage life as a student once they are enrolled. Means and Pyne (2017) emphasized because many first-generation students continue to manage family responsibilities while attending college, they often face time constraints, which curtail their ability to engage in academic and social opportunities. These women all discussed Alpha University as a place of wealth and felt most of the other students did not have concerns about money like they did as first-generation students. They listened to other students talk about where they spent their summers or their recent vacations, but as low-income students, their families did not even have the finances to bring them to college. While these women were not looking for a handout, they recognized the need for financial support in cocurriculars to increase their success and overall Ivy experience.

Creating Inclusive Spaces

Several participants expressed Alpha University could create sense of belonging for first-generation, African American women, by being intentional in diversity and inclusion efforts for students participating in cocurriculars. Participants shared it was not enough to have pictures of diversity on the website; Alpha University had to be intentional about creating inclusive cocurricular spaces. Lauren indicated Alpha should “make sure that all extracurricular spaces are places where students of color feel comfortable.” Kerry shared:

I feel like the sense of belonging would have to come with wanting African American, low-income females for their identity and what they'll bring to the table, rather than the numbers that they bring in, the diversity that they bring. I feel like Alpha does this thing where they choose you because you will help their diversity numbers, but they didn't choose you for you. Because there aren't any things on campus that catered to that identity here. So, if you look for a first-gen low income female, or first-gen female kind of capacity here, there is none. Because although the university is making changes in the right direction, you still have to seek out a lot of the different activities and a lot of the different things that you want to do here on campus. So, in my opinion, they have to create a space or be cognizant of the fact that there isn't something like that for us here.

Lauren added to her perspective by commenting:

For first-gen students of color, it sometimes feels like we're brought in and people who are like me, see pictures on the website and look at our diversity statistics, but then once you get here it's kind of like, what are you doing to support us here?

The participants recognized Alpha University was attempting to make tangible changes by creating—and recently restructuring—the diversity and inclusion office for students. They were hopeful the new mission and vision of the office would continue to provide cocurricular leadership training and additional support networks to strengthen belonging for marginalized student groups participating in cocurriculars.

According to Andermann and Freeman (2004), sense of belonging takes on heightened significance in environments individuals experience as different, unfamiliar, or foreign and in contexts where some individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported, and unwelcomed. First-generation, African American women students may report feeling “invisible, unsupported, or out of place” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 90) on a PWI campus. Participants recognized the university was moving in the right direction by offering more diverse and inclusive student initiatives, but, as Gina stated, Alpha could be more “intentional about creating spaces or encouraging African American, first-gen women to get to know each other and find community with each other.” These women all acknowledged the physical space (i.e., the building) on campus for students of color but voiced their concerns about creating an inclusive campus

climate beyond a building. Their expectations to have a better connection with the campus and sense of belonging involved more engaging and structured cocurricular experiences and stronger ties to Black administrators and faculty.

Connection to Black Administrators

In creating sense of belonging, participants agreed there is a need for more African American administrators (including faculty) on campus who were connected to African American students. Johnson et al. (2007) cited positive peer and faculty interactions can influence students' sense of belonging by making complex environments feel more socially or academically supportive. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found faculty interactions had a positive impact on student involvement and persistence. Several participants were students in the African American studies program and spoke about their connection with faculty in that department. Participants reported the African American studies faculty were accommodating to and supportive of their struggles as Ivy League students in an isolating and alienating environment. It was easy for Amber to find community in the African American studies department with faculty when students made inappropriate comments, like the one she described:

I had one White guy say to me and a couple other AAS majors, "Being Black and studying African American studies is like . . . just digging your own grave" or something. Like you're not doing anything. Nobody's going to take you seriously.

Faith described her perspective on the importance of African American administrators:

So, I would love to think that they [Alpha] should bring in more administrators and have more centralized programs. I think they should work it [diversity and inclusion] into orientations. So, I'm going to all these orientation events about blah, blah, blah this, and blah, blah, blah that, but nothing about being first-gen and being a woman of color and being a poor student, trying to figure out how to get by in this university, and how not to feel so lonely and isolated. And having more open dialogue about what that actually means and what the administration can actually do than just being like, "we have a student of color space." I know you have a student of color space, but what else are you going to do about this?

Connecting with faculty and administrators is important to these students. In support of the literature, Porter and Dean (2015) found African American undergraduate women benefit from seeing administrators who look like them in leadership positions on campus. Students find value and trust in relationships with African American administrators and faculty members who they feel support them and care about their well-being and success (Porter & Dean, 2015). These first-generation, African American women were clear cocurricular programs and activities were instrumental in providing them with support networks, skills, strategies, and an inclusive campus environment necessary to help them successfully navigate this Ivy institution setting.

Chapter Summary

Findings presented in this chapter are a narrative description of the cocurricular experiences of eight, first-generation, African American, undergraduate, women students attending an Ivy League institution. Qualitative data were gathered from individual interviews, focus groups, and a participant-checking document. Common themes, skills, and strategies emerged from answers to research questions. Participants discussed how cocurricular programs were a support network for them as they navigated their collegiate experiences. Emerging subthemes included friendship, community, sense of belonging, affirmation, mental health, self-awareness, and isolation. Participants learned and used networking, time management, balance, authenticity, and leadership skills from cocurricular programs, which assisted them in navigating their Ivy League experience. The women expressed how Alpha University could create sense of belonging to support them as first-generation, African American students through mentorship programs, financial support, creating intentional diversity spaces, and connection to more administrators. These women discussed how participation in cocurricular programs was instrumental to their success as students at Alpha University. Findings revealed these African

American women were a reciprocating source of support for each other through their participation in cocurriculars, and they formed a sister circle of friendship and encouragement with other women who looked like them. Their narratives present administrators with a foundation and information to further explore the experiences of these women, as they manage their multiple identities at Alpha University. Emerging subthemes from each research question reflect the integration of this research with CRT, sense of belonging, and Black feminist frameworks to understand the experiences first-generation, African American women and how they successfully navigate their Ivy collegiate experience through cocurricular programs. The following chapter includes conclusions based on the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of this research, the literature, and theoretical framework are discussed in this chapter. In the previous four chapters, the researcher described experiences of first-generation African American undergraduate women and how they navigated their undergraduate experience through cocurricular involvement at an Ivy League institution. Research questions provided the framework for participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words. Understanding these students' lived experiences during their matriculation at an Ivy League institution gives meaning and validity to their individual and group positionality in higher education and overall educational success. From the findings, the researcher found a connection between the theoretical framework of CRT, sense of belonging, and Black feminist theory perspectives and participants' responses. The researcher used this connection to explore how these women negotiated and managed their multiple identities at an Ivy institution, as described in this chapter. This chapter also includes recommendations and implications for educational leaders as well as limitations of the findings. Additionally, this chapter includes suggestions for improving organizational and program support networks for first-generation, African American women and improved practices for administrators. Chapter 5 concludes with lessons the researcher learned from leading this research inquiry, and suggestions for implementing improvements as an educational leader and scholar-practitioner.

Summary of Results

This research is a phenomenological study to understand how first-generation African American women students use cocurricular programs as support networks to navigate their undergraduate experience. Participants included eight, undergraduate, first-generation, African American, women students who self-selected to participate in this research investigation. Study

participants self-identified as first-generation, African American, women, undergraduate students. Five seniors, one junior, and two sophomore participants represented a variety of academic majors and cocurricular activities. The researcher's lens of their out-of-the-classroom experiences offered a unique perspective into how these students managed, negotiated, and thrived in communities they created for themselves in an elite, Ivy institution setting.

Participant data were collected from one 60-minute, in-person interview and one 60-minute focus group interview. Participant responses from individual and group interviews were transcribed and coded. Emerging themes and subthemes, strategies, and recommendations were organized into a participant-checking document, and focus group interview questions were designed to confirm if subthemes were accurate. The researcher used focus groups to confirm credibility of participant responses and validate the voice and viewpoint of participants. The researcher sought to answer the following researcher questions:

1. How do cocurricular programs provide support networks for first-generation, African American, women students to navigate the collegiate experience at one Ivy institution?
2. What skills and strategies do first-generation, African American, women students learn and use from cocurricular programs to assist them in navigating their collegiate experience?
3. How could this Ivy institution create sense of belonging for first-generation, African American, women students through cocurricular programs?

Participants described their lived cocurricular experiences and perspectives through responses to the research questions (see Appendix C).

Previous researchers have focused on what African American students lack socially and academically, and the impact those difficulties have on their success in higher education. As a marginalized group, a need exists for more research on how first-generation, African American, women students navigate their collegiate experience through their participation in clubs and organizations, and what additional mechanisms of support can be incorporated to enhance and improve experiences at Ivy institutions. This researcher has expanded the literature on cocurricular experiences of first-generation, African American women attending an Ivy League institution and intersections of gender, race, and first-generation status with their cocurricular involvement. Findings of the research give a voice to and validates these unique women and their experiences.

Research Findings and Discussions

The findings, in response to the research questions, suggest first-generation, African American, undergraduate women heavily use and rely on clubs and organizations as support networks to assist in navigating collegiate experiences at one Ivy institution. This section contains the following research question themes: (a) cocurricular involvement, (b) development of skills and strategies, and (c) creating belongingness and inclusiveness. In each theme, major research findings are presented and compared to current literature. The researcher will discuss lessons learned from the research, how research findings support the existing literature, and unique ways participants navigated collegiate life through cocurricular involvement at an Ivy institution. While findings are specific to first-generation, African American, undergraduate women at Alpha University, implications can be used in PWI and Ivy League institutional settings where African American women are marginalized students.

Cocurricular Involvement

Cocurricular student participation is widely recognized and promoted as an integral part of student life (Kuh, 2001). Positive cocurricular interactions enhance student experiences in and outside of the classroom. Participants responded to interview questions about the role of curricular involvement in their lives, and seven subthemes emerged: friendship, community, sense of belonging, affirmation, self-awareness, mental health, and isolation. One finding included first-generation African American women students' use of cocurricular programs as a support network to navigate their collegiate experiences at one Ivy institution.

One finding was that all participants overwhelmingly expressed the positive impact of, and support received from, cocurricular involvement. Cocurricular involvement was an essential part of their success as first-generation, African American women at this Ivy institution. As first-generation students, many participants had limited cultural capital or knowledge about the college experience at their time of enrollment and needed assistance in adjusting to campus culture and environment. Participants learned to use cocurricular involvement to gain the cultural capital necessary to navigate Alpha University as African American women negotiating their multiple identities. These women indicated they gained a sense of fulfillment, found welcoming spaces, and identified sources of support from cocurricular involvement.

The second unexpected finding was these women only felt sense of belonging when they participated in cocurricular activities with other African American women. In the literature, African American women in PWI environments experienced unique challenges, including “campus-wide internalized oppression, negative classroom experiences, and underdeveloped support systems” (Glenn & Johnson, 2012, p. 352). In this research, marginalized experiences led them to find sense of belonging and community with other Black women in counter-spaces,

or safe spaces occupied by members of underrepresented student groups, where they felt their multiple identities and voices were affirmed and validated. These women found support in counter-spaces through their cocurricular involvement. They created sister circles of friendship and support in cocurricular activities, such as Black dance groups, BSU, Black advocacy groups, Black culture groups, and a Black women's affinity group. These women felt and experienced alienation and isolation when they attempted to participate in groups other than Black cocurricular activities. Several students reported they dropped a cocurricular activity when only one or two Black students were in the group, even if they enjoyed the activity. They reported feelings of alienation and isolation in those groups and blocked those experiences from their memories and resumes. Participants' feelings of isolation were reflected in Strayhorn's (2019) findings, which supported negative experiences by pointing out all involvement is not necessarily good and does not create sense of belonging. Additionally, students of color can experience a heightened sense of concern about their safety and a lack of support and belonging on PWI campuses (Strayhorn, 2019).

Women in this study discussed how they used cocurricular activities as a support network to assist in navigating their collegiate experiences at Alpha University. Although all participants experienced alienation and isolation outside of their Black cocurricular activities, one student continued to participate in a predominantly White organization as one of only a few African American students in the group. Her participation was based on representing other Black students on campus and serving as a resource to provide valuable information to other Black students. Participants all explicitly stated cocurricular involvement was instrumental in creating a strong support network and sense of belonging during their collegiate experience. They

expressed their involvement in cocurricular activities with other African American women with similar interests assisted them in successfully navigating at Alpha University.

Development of Skills and Strategies

As Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, and Flowers (2004) explained, intriguing evidence indicates experiences in and out of the classroom influence the intellectual and personal development of college students and differ along dimensions of race/ethnicity and first-generation status. In this research question, participants discussed skills and strategies learned from their cocurricular involvement, and six subthemes emerged: (a) professionalism, (b) leadership, (c) time management, (d) listening, (e) voicing an opinion, and (f) networking.

As evidenced in the literature, Black, women students find themselves working hard to balance their multiple identities to thrive in PWI campus environments (Fhagen-Smith et al., 2010). However, their identity development is based on their ability to manage the intersections of race, gender, class, and first-generation status, and to assimilate and persist in PWI settings. Miller (2017) noted managing multiple identities is a challenging feat for many students, but is often a difficult barrier for Black women at PWIs. Women participants used their cocurricular involvement to create the opportunity to overcome challenges, develop and learn useful skills and strategies to navigate campus culture, and add value to their Ivy League education.

Participants recognized they were developing real-world skills by learning how to effectively run a meeting, network, talk to people, listen, and have authentic conversations. The researcher gleaned several takeaways from participant responses. First, networking efforts and connections made at Alpha University would take participants far in life, and the name of this elite institution would provide professional connections for them. Even though participants felt changes to the campus climate needed to be addressed, one participant explained they only had

to “endure it for 4 years while trying to make small changes for the next incoming classes—leaving the campus better than it was when [they] arrived.” Several participants mentioned Alpha is not forever, but the education, skills, and strategies learned while at Alpha were lasting. Next, participants shared skills learned in cocurricular involvement were transferable, meaning skills they learned in a dance group or engineering club would be applicable after graduation in their respective fields of industry or graduate school. Lastly, this researcher learned, because these women had to manage and negotiate their race, gender, and first-generation status, they developed skills and strategies in spite of their marginalized status, isolation, alienation, and sometimes unsupportive campus climate. This is in direct correlation to the literature, which indicates Black women manage their multiple identities so well they have developed an educational resilience and have become victims of their own advancement, creating a paradox of success (Bond, 2011). Also, in connection with the literature, Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2000) explained PWIs may be less eager to invest in Black women students due to their apparent success, but these students described their experiences as isolating and painful. However, the significance of skills and strategies learned from their cocurricular involvement will be instrumental to successful navigation at Alpha University and future success in life.

Creating Belongingness and Inclusiveness

According to Dortch and Patel (2017), when African American women students have sense of belonging at PWIs, their overall well-being, level of success, and campus experiences are enhanced. Cocurricular involvement is crucial to cultivating a positive collegiate experience. In creating belongingness and inclusiveness, Strayhorn (2019) connected student matriculation to engagement on campus. In the third research question, the women provided recommendations to create more inclusive cocurricular spaces and sense of belonging, including a first-generation,

African American women's mentoring program, cocurricular financial support, the creation of cocurricular inclusive spaces, and more connection to Black administrators.

These recommendations provided avenues to create affirming spaces for participants and other women who share their multiple identities. In support of the literature, creating a campus climate where students felt they belonged was a significant part of participants' successful navigation at Alpha University. According to Hurtado and Carter (1997), when African American students are in negative campus spaces—a hostile or an unsupportive campus climate—their sense of belonging, academic performance, and persistence to graduate is adversely affected. Strange and Banning (2001) explained Black students experience PWI environments differently than their White peers, and campus environments set conditions that affect student learning. Jones (2000) found poor institutional climates and instances of racism attributed in large part to Black students' early departures from PWIs. Several students expressed there was much work to do at Alpha University in the area of diversity and inclusion, but they did not want to become too outspoken and jeopardize their student status, because they were the first in their families to attend college.

Observations from student recommendations provided texture to the researcher's understanding of their experiences. Several participants explained there was a "parallel Alpha" for Black students. Parallel Alpha is a counter-culture for Black students to express their culture, values, and norms that differ from mainstream Alpha University culture. Parallel Alpha is a safe space where Black students find sense of belonging and do not have to explain their culture to their White peers. Sedlacek (1999) affirmed Black students need to identify and engage with a community based on culture or race, and students learn to manage and negotiate their blackness by providing support to each other to sustain them as they confront and navigate the PWI

experience. Participants used their cocurricular involvement to operate in parallel Alpha by creating sense of belonging and community spaces as support networks.

In creating sense of belonging, this researcher discovered several participants recommended the need to connect with African American administrative faculty and staff. This discovery was unexpected, but also an encouraging finding as a researcher. In diversity practitioner meetings and conversations with other African American administrators at Alpha University, discussions often include our individual and departmental roles to support African American students. However, with this new information, discussions can be steered toward how administrators can support these students as collective colleagues. In support of this research discovery, Winkle-Wagner (2009) suggested establishing safe spaces for African American students to be with other African American women. Colleges could establish liminal or transformative spaces on campus to allow these groups of women the opportunity to form community and focus less on their race and more on supporting their matriculation at an elite Ivy institution (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Knowing these women need more support will allow administrators an opportunity to engage each other as colleagues to determine next steps in developing a structured cocurricular program to support first-generation African American women students.

Implication of Results for Theory, Policy, and Practice

The findings support the challenges and need for support networks in cocurricular programs for first-generation, African American women at an Ivy institution. Through the lens of CRT, Black feminists, and sense of belonging frameworks, it was clear to the researcher these women had to manage and negotiate their multiple identities. While limited research exists on the marginalized experiences of first-generation, African American women at Ivy institutions,

their marginalization has translated into invisibility and devaluing of their social and academic needs (C. H. Patton & Croom, 2017). Participants mentioned difficulty establishing sense of belonging, isolation, and invisibility experienced in cocurricular participation with White peers.

Findings were examined through a CRT framework under the notion racism is an everyday occurrence in society. Addressing the construct of racism on college campuses continues to be a challenge for educational leaders. According to Harper et al. (2018), CRT is useful in higher education to examine policies affecting African American students and factors responsible for continued disparities and opportunity gaps. Application of CRT to the research questions allowed participants a space to share their unique cocurricular experiences through first-person narratives—removing the power of voice from their oppressors in speaking their truth. First-person narratives allow African American women to share lived experiences about which they claim to be experts because they are more “credible and believable than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (Collins, 1989, p. 759). Through analysis and interpretation of participant narratives in this study, participant voices were acknowledged, and their experiences were shown not to exist in isolation. The research findings and recommendations, filtered through a CRT lens, represent participants’ marginalized perspectives to understand race and inequities in their experiences.

Sense of belonging as a guiding framework for this research addressed difficulties that participants had in finding welcoming cocurricular spaces at Alpha University. In support of the literature, Hunter et al. (2019) commented sense of belonging and finding community is important to Black college students’ ability to thrive in PWI spaces. Additionally, Strayhorn’s (2019) research emphasized meaningful student involvement, positive peer interactions, and socializing with faculty outside of the classroom increased students’ sense of belonging and

student success. Cocurricular involvement and club membership are influential factors that contribute to sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In creating inclusive and welcoming spaces for first-generation, African American women, the sense of belonging framework is fostered by listening to perceptions of their experiences to determine the nature of the support networks needed. In turn, these student perceptions should guide administrators to be intentional to create inclusive campus spaces for diverse students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Black women negotiating and managing multiple identities shape how they experience sense of belonging and create community.

As an intersectional framework, Black feminist theory acknowledges common struggles of Black women against multiple oppressors (Stewart, 2008). Understanding their multiple identities of race and gender and how they negotiate these identities provided women participants the opportunity to share their unique marginalized perspective. Howard-Hamilton (2003) explained Black feminist thought can be an appropriate framework to understand the struggles and needs of young Black women in college. This framework can also be used to assist these women with how to deal with the microaggressions they experience each day at Alpha University. In support of the findings, Few (2007) indicated Black feminist thought speaks to experiences of African American women and women of the African diaspora. Allowing these women space and opportunity in cocurricular involvement to discuss threats to their sense of belonging, community, and well-being is "crucial in assisting this group to successfully navigate the tumultuous journey toward forming a positive self-identity" (Henry et al., 2010, p. 241).

Through individual and focus group interviews, eight, first-generation, African American women were given time and space to share their perspectives relating to their cocurricular involvement at an Ivy institution. The women shared they had not had the opportunity to discuss

their curricular involvement with administrators. Several participants mentioned their affiliation with Black affinity spaces on campus, but did not feel administrators were addressing their specific needs and identities as first-generation students. These women participants all acknowledged their struggles, negative messages, isolation, and oppression they encountered at Alpha University. Black feminist thought gave a voice and understanding to the women and their experiences. Allowing the women to openly express themselves is important to Black feminist thought because Black feminism explains the collective voice and historical experience that influence Black women through a historical perspective. As an example, during the focus group, one participant described how Black women were exoticized by their White peers yet ignored by Black men, and Black love was introduced as a conversation topic. Although Black love was not a theme or subtheme, it occurred to this researcher these women needed a space to share and express their feelings and to feel heard and validated. Several participants shared the lack of love for Black women at Alpha University, but all agreed their sister circles were supportive to understanding their struggles. A Black feminist framework in this research contextualizes and adds meaning to participants' collective experiences and the resilience these women exhibit while managing their unique identities.

Contributions to the Field of Educational Leadership

This study has contributed to the literature on how first-generation African American undergraduate women navigate their collegiate experience through cocurricular involvement at an Ivy League institution. The uniqueness of this study comes from the self-selection of research participants, phenomenological research methodology, and narrative perspectives of African American women at an Ivy institution. Much of the extant literature does not include the multiple intersections (i.e., race, gender, and first-generation) of these students and their out-of-the-

classroom experiences in an Ivy League setting. This study closes the gap on research available about African American, women students, and the influences of cocurricular involvement on successful matriculation at an Ivy institution. From the study findings, educational leaders should consider implementing additional support networks and be intentional about creating inclusive spaces to address issues and challenges effectively that these students manage and negotiate for their successful navigation at Alpha University. Additionally, there should be a shared responsibility by administrators and students for campus improvements that lead to successful student outcomes and experiences. Johnson et al. (2007) explained institutional leaders should be willing to change campus structures rather than ask students to adapt to an unwelcoming campus environment. In sharing responsibility for positive improvements and change, all interested stakeholders should understand the importance of fostering a diverse campus climate to promote cocurricular involvement, development of skills, strategies, sense of belonging, and an inclusive campus environment for first-generation, African American women at elite PWI institutions.

Recommendations and Implications for Educational Leadership

Findings indicate these women's cocurricular involvement is an instrumental support network in the navigation of their collegiate experiences. Primarily White institutions often attempt to increase the diversity of their institutions but struggle to develop and provide adequate programs to address aspects of first-generation, African American women's identities as developing students and offer a positive campus climate and successful in-and-out of classroom experiences (Hannon et al., 2016). Findings from this study suggest implications for educational leaders to positively affect experiences of first-generation, African American, Ivy League, women students.

Based on findings from participants and analysis of their recommendations, administrators, faculty, and staff will need to work together to develop and implement services and programs, strategies, and initiatives to help these women succeed. It is appropriate to consider perspectives of these women to address their needs and struggles they experience. The following recommendations from this research will be useful for educational leaders heading improvement efforts at this Ivy institution:

1. Develop (or continue) ongoing cultural sensitivity training for all students participating in cocurricular programs.
2. Develop a comprehensive orientation program for first-generation, African American women to facilitate their transition at an Ivy institution.
3. Implement a first-generation, African American woman freshman seminar class, specifically designed and structured to address their issues and challenges, and how to navigate their multiple identities in an Ivy and real-world setting. This seminar class would challenge administrators to learn more about the needs of this student population and positively affect and support their self-esteem and adjustment at an Ivy institution.
4. Develop a structured mentoring program with African American administrators and faculty, designed to prepare and empower these women for anticipated challenges, and create opportunities to share their feelings and create sense of belonging.
5. Eliminate a point-based, first-generation program by acknowledging these students need to work and may not be able to adhere to strict program guidelines for attending campus events.

6. Increase administrative support and funding for Black women organizations and provide leadership training and strategies to enhance programming initiatives.
7. Implement a strong African American women's alumni support network, so these alumni can engage in ongoing dialogue about their experiences and educational goals.
8. Establish an African American women's center designed to foster the growth and development of African American women and multiple aspects of their identity.
9. Create sister circle communities with African American women from Ivy/PWIs as a broader support network.
10. Develop a strategic plan with goals and objectives to address implemented programs and initiatives for first-generation, African American women. The strategic plan should include a 2-, 4-, and 6-year evaluation of programs and initiatives and involve students in the evaluation process.

These recommendations should challenge practitioners who are implementing programs for African American college women, to recognize and consider multiple aspects of first-generation, African American women's identities when developing support programs. Watt (2006) explained targeted programs for African American women created opportunities for women to discuss their feelings about what it means to be both Black and women on a PWI college campus. At the same time, practitioners have the opportunity to affirm these students' identities and experiences.

Implications for Future Research

This research has added to limited research about cocurricular experiences of first-generation, African American women attending an Ivy institution. Future research should:

1. Explore the experiences of first-generation, African American women attending multiple Ivy institutions. Do they have the same experiences expressed by the other students at Alpha University?
2. Further investigate the experiences of first-generation, African American women alumni in comparison with current students.
3. Explore cocurricular experiences of first-generation, African American women at HBCUs with their peers at PWIs.
4. Revisit the campus in a few years to investigate if any implemented changes and support programs made a difference in student perceptions of their experiences.

Implications for future research are my interpretations from participant narratives and their recommendations.

The final and most important recommendation based on the research findings is for Ivy League institutions to form a consortium to address the needs of African American students—much like the first-generation, low-income consortium previously mentioned. An African American student consortium would allow collaborating administrators to share information, best practices, and training programs to address the unique needs of these students. The recommendation would also include bringing African American students from other Ivy institutions together to create meaningful connections and enriching student leadership training in social development, educational programming, empowering cultural enrichment, and career preparation.

During the research-gathering phase, the researcher surveyed each Ivy League institution to read about programs, clubs and organizations, and support networks each institution offered their African American students. Each institution seemed to offer different student initiatives.

Several Ivy institutions implemented Black student residential housing groups where students learned to build and maintain a cohesive community; have enriching cultural events; and host a variety of activities involving faculty, administrators, and alumni. These residential housing groups were a valuable source of support and information on academic decisions, career choices, and personal goals and growth. Other Ivy institutions supported African American students through peer mentoring programs, wellness programs, Black student retreats, community and civic engagement, and African Diaspora experiential learning experiences. By collaborating and sharing ideas in a consortium, administrators and students engage in a broader community and learn how to make a positive impact for these students, as they transition and learn how to manage their multiple intersections in the Ivy setting.

There is a growing body of literature for practitioners who are interested in advancing this meaningful and rewarding work. Scholars such as Dr. Terrell Strayhorn, Dr. Shaun Harper, and others are focusing on the importance of understanding and making meaning of experiences of African American students. Additionally, practitioners can build on their knowledge about students of color by attending the National Conference for Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education. The National Conference for Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education is designed to address ethnic relations and provide programming, training, and discussions for improving campus climate for underrepresented students. Likewise, the former First Lady, Michelle Obama, will launch a video series, *A Year of Firsts*, focusing on experiences of first-generation college students. Institutions and higher education administrators must be intentional about creating inclusive spaces for these women. Additional research will expand institutional support for first-generation, African American women.

Limitations

Research presented in this phenomenological study expands the experiences of eight, first-generation, African American, undergraduate women at an Ivy institution. There are four limitations to this research. First, the study was limited to first-generation, African American women and not open to all African American women at Alpha University. Another limitation is this study focused on cocurricular experiences of participants and did not include academic experiences or overall campus climate. Research was limited to one Ivy institution and no other PWI or elite institutions. Lastly, this research did not include experiences of African American men or other students of color, so findings are not transferable to those students. Because, this researcher is a first-generation, African American woman who attended a PWI, it was necessary to bracket any personal experiences to conflate them with the research participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). However, this researcher did disclose her positionality and curiosity in understanding their Ivy League experiences to participants. In reflection of the research process, this researcher could have included more participants. In the initial research inquiry, the intended research pool was to include 10 to 12 participants, but after eight interviews and two focus groups, the data reached a saturation point, and participants offered no new information.

Implication for Leadership and Growth

As an educational leader and scholar-practitioner, I gained valuable research and transformational leadership skills by leading this research initiative, which will continue to enhance my professional practice. In my role as an educational leader, conducting this research has given me skills and opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to a body of knowledge on a topic I am passionate about and on which I will continue to grow in my expertise. Through leading this higher education improvement initiative, the most important lesson learned is

providing students with the opportunity, forum, and space to express themselves and their experiences. Many institutions enroll students from diverse backgrounds and cultures, but enrollment does not always mean an inclusive campus climate and culture. Preparation and planning should be at the forefront of these enrollment conversations, instead of trying to figure out what is best for students after they arrive. Also, there must be a continual conversation with marginalized student groups to bring focus and attention to their challenges and to address their changing needs.

Throughout the participant interview process, I thought about my previous experiences at a PWI as a first-generation, Black woman. I could relate to participant responses, but they were not my experiences, and I was able to bracket those experiences to remain objective during the process. I felt, even though there had been many of years since my undergraduate matriculation, there were still racial issues on a PWI campus, and the overall climate had not changed. In some instances, the racial climate is worse today. I also observed language exists today that did not then, such as first-generation students, microaggressions, finding community, sister circles, resilience, and isolation. I experienced all those disparities, but the language, focus, and attention to adequately express myself at the time were unavailable, and I learned to cope in the existing surroundings. After eight participant interviews, the research had reached a saturation point, but I also found their narratives and experiences to be emotionally heavy. In hearing their experiences, I became more determined than ever to complete the research, especially after participants communicated the importance and impact of this research.

Through leading this research inquiry and learning the potential impact of my work, my leadership growth included an improvement in my written and verbal communication, more developed critical thinking and leadership skills, confidence, and the organizational skills to

manage a dissertation research project. These skills are preparation for my next level of work. Through my passion for learning more about experiences of first-generation students, I am affiliated with a first-generation Ivy consortium, which has yearly conferences and quarterly webinars. I attend first-generation campus events at Alpha University to support and interact with first-year students. I am also in the process of collaborating with a campus colleague to teach a first-generation freshman seminar class and collaborate on a publication. I will be sharing my dissertation work at the Ivy consortium conference in November 2020 and at the NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education conference in 2021. I will be publishing my dissertation findings in the *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education* and *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. I am interested in pursuing other research topics at PWIs. I will continue to read and stay current on the topic of first-generation students and diversity and inclusion issues in higher education.

Conclusion

This researcher came into this inquiry with the understanding that African American women participated in clubs and organizations based on their interests to help them navigate their collegiate success at one Ivy institution. In this examination of their experiences at Alpha University, this researcher discovered these women only found their support network by participating in activities with other African American women. In these sister circle spaces, these women found friendship, encouragement, affirmation, sense of belonging, and a support network from other African American women. Harper and Hurtado (2007) reflected on how cocurricular organizations play a significant role in influencing retention for Black women, who continue to persist and are involved on their PWI campuses.

Higher education administrators will need to be more intentional in creating inclusive spaces and supporting the multiple identities students negotiate and manage in, sometimes, unwelcoming campus environments. As practitioners, we need to have critical conversations with students and design programs to assist them to thrive and achieve success. My recommendations include creating meaningful opportunities and spaces for the unique and diverse needs of first-generation, African American, women students. While their narratives were compelling and heavy, this Ivy institution, like many other PWIs, will need to offer stronger support networks, evaluate services, and continue to listen to the voices and needs of these and other marginalized students. This researcher is inspired by these women and encouraged that their lived experiences inspire change.

Concluding Statement

This research process has given me a deeper level of awareness about issues and challenges African American women manage at an Ivy League institution. These women were reflective and uplifting, and, at the same time, their narratives were heavy with the weight of resilience these women carried with them each day to manage and negotiate their existence at an elite Ivy institution. I had the idea for this research several years ago when I had a brief conversation with an African American undergraduate woman student who shared with me she was strongly encouraged by a White faculty member to pursue another academic major because the current major was going to be too difficult for her. She shared Alpha University can be a difficult place to navigate for African American students, and she relied on support from activities other than academics to help her balance life and be successful. During the investigation phase of this research, I read and reviewed numerous articles and books that pointed out present-day struggles of African American undergraduate women students. As a

first-generation, African American woman, when I attended a PWI, it was difficult; however, I thought the present-day campus climate was more accommodating to students of color—it is not.

As I prepared interview questions, checked recording devices, and copied consent forms, I was not prepared for the experiences these women shared, which included isolation, microaggressions, and marginalization. I was encouraged through the research process, because these women discussed how their cocurricular involvement was a support network to assist them in navigating their collegiate experiences at Alpha University. They all explicitly stated the cocurricular activities in which they participated were instrumental in creating a strong support network and sense of belonging during their collegiate experience. These women expressed how being engaged in these activities with other African American women who shared similar interests was meaningful, energizing, and a form of self-care in an individualist and isolating environment.

I learned this research process required managing my multiple identities for research objectivity. I also understood these women because of my own experiences as a first-generation student at a PWI. My journaling process after each interview kept me focused on research details. This research process has given me a sense of self-awareness and perspective as an African American, woman administrator at a PWI. My perspectives and personal experiences were a strength in the research process and provided meaning to the interviews, as I established rapport with participants. Through this research process, I gained an understanding of my positionality and potential for impact as an administrator in higher education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A



AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH

African American Female, First-Generation Participants Needed for Dissertation Research

Hello, I am a current doctoral candidate and I am researching the experiences of **African American female, first-generation** undergraduate students who participate in **co or extra- curricular activities** at this **Ivy Institution**. If you are interested in sharing your Ivy League experiences to advance research, please use this link – <https://forms.gle/tr2HoRoP5HJAZT6C6> or the QR code below to provide your information and you will be contacted for an individual interview and a focus group interview.



Participants Needed

African American Female
First-Generation Ivy
League
Undergraduate
Students

Juniors and Seniors

Involved in One or More
Cocurricular Activities

\$25 Gift Card to
participants who
participate in 2
interviews

For more information please
email me at wallacep@rider.edu
or call me at 609-826-6972

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please read the following information carefully, as it outlines the scope and limitations of your participation in the proposed research study.

STUDY: Understanding How First-Generation African American Women Undergraduate Students Navigate Their Collegiate Experience Through Cocurricular Programs at One Ivy Institution

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: [redacted]

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S DEPARTMENT: [redacted]

Primary Researcher Leading the Research: Paryn A. Wallace

Research Purpose

- This research examines how cocurricular programs offered at one ivy institution provide support networks for African American women first-generation students to navigate their collegiate experience.
- The purpose of this inquiry is to close the gap in the research available about African American women students and the influences of cocurricular programs on their successful matriculation at one ivy institution.

Procedures

- The study will require you to participate in one individual interview, for approximately 60 minutes and one focus group for approximately 60 minutes.
- The individual interview will include questions related to your college experiences, including your involvement in cocurricular programs and how your involvement contributes to your collegiate experiences as a student.
- After all individual interviews are analyzed, you will participate in a focus group to review the research findings. The 60-minute focus group is designed to ensure that your voice has been captured appropriately throughout the research. Also, during the focus group, we will discuss group collective lived experiences.
- I will record, transcribe, and analyze each interview, and I will take notes while we conduct the interview.
- I am asking your permission to allow me to audiotape (sound) as part of this research study at both the individual interview and focus group.
- The recording(s) will be used for analysis of study data by the research team. The recording(s) will include your name and the content of the interview discussion. After transcription, your name will be deleted, and you will be identified by a pseudonym and the recordings will be deleted. If you say anything that you believe at a later point may be hurtful and/or damage your reputation, you can ask that certain text be removed from the dataset/transcripts.

- The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file cabinet and linked with a code to subjects' identity and will be deleted after transcription.
- There will be approximately 12- 15 individuals interviewed for this study, including you if you choose to participate.
- You should ask any questions you have about the interviews, the research, or the methods at any time, including while the interview is being conducted.
- Interviews will begin in late October/early November 2019.

Risks

- Participation in this study is voluntary. **You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you.** In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.
- Although participating in this research study poses minimal risks, you may feel uncomfortable during the interview. Should you need assistance managing your feelings after the interview, you should contact [redacted].

Benefits

- Possible benefits of this research include:
 - Gaining a deeper understanding of your collegiate experiences.
 - Gaining awareness of the many factors that shape your ability to navigate and persist in college.
 - Enhancing your ability to reflect critically on your experience at an ivy institution.
 - Your contribution to the body of work on African American first-generation undergraduate students in higher education.

Compensation

- There is no cost to you to participate in this study.
- Your participation is voluntary. You will receive a \$25 gift card for choosing to participate in both the interview and focus group.

Privacy and Confidentiality

- This research will be kept private. After transcription, your name will be deleted, and you will be identified by a pseudonym and the recordings will be deleted. This information will be stored in such a manner that minimal linkage between your identity and responses in the research exists. In the actual dissertation, you will be identified by a pseudonym. Please note that I will keep this information private by limiting individuals' access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location, specifically in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. Notes taken by hand during the interviews will be kept in a locked file cabinet.
- The interviews and focus group will be conducted in the [redacted] in a private room or similarly private location based on room availability. However, I cannot guarantee that no

one will overhear the questions asked or your responses. Thus, I cannot guarantee confidentiality.

- The research team, my dissertation committee, and the Institutional Review Board at Rider University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, group results will be stated, and pseudonyms will be used.
- The data generated from this study may be used in future conference presentations and publications.

Questions

- If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact me:
Paryn A. Wallace
Doctoral Candidate
Rider University
The College of Education and Human Services, Memorial Hall
2083 Lawrenceville Road
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
Phone: 609-826-6972
Email: wallacep@rider.edu

You may also contact my Rider University faculty advisor:

Dr. Tricia Nolfi, Assistant Professor
Rider University, The College of Education and Human Services
Memorial Hall
2083 Lawrenceville Road
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
Phone: 609-895-5636
Email: tnolfi@rider.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator at Rider University:

Karen L. Gischlar, Ph.D.
Program Director and Associate Professor, School Psychology Program
Department of Graduate Education, Leadership and Counseling
Phone: 609-896-7751
Email: kgischlar@rider.edu

Alpha University Principal Investigator:
[redacted]

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if problems arise that you do not feel you can discuss with the Investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board at:
Assistant Director, Research Integrity and Assurance
[redacted]

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Participant (Print) _____

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Primary Researcher Signature _____ Date _____

Audio Recording:

With your permission, I would like to audio-record the interview. Please sign below if you agree to be audio-recorded.

I hereby give my consent for audio recording:

Participant Signature _____ Date: _____

Appendix C

Individual Interview Protocol Script

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Paryn Wallace. I am a doctoral candidate at Rider University in the Department of Graduate Education, Leadership and Counseling. I am pursuing a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership. I am studying how African American first-generation, women students use cocurricular programs to navigate their ivy collegiate experience. The purpose of this inquiry is to close the gap in the research available about African American women students and the influences of cocurricular programs on their successful matriculation at an Ivy Institution. The study will require you to participate in one individual interview, for approximately 60 minutes and one focus group for approximately 60 minutes.

This individual interview will include questions related to your college experiences, including your involvement in cocurricular programs and how your involvement contributes to your collegiate success as a student. (In this research, the term cocurricular is used to refer to clubs, organizations, and programs that give you the opportunity to develop interests or skill sets that are not directly related to your academic pursuit). After all individual interviews are analyzed, you will be invited to participate in a focus group to discuss the research findings. I will record, transcribe, and analyze each interview, and I will take notes while we conduct the interview.

I previously emailed you a copy of the consent form, do you have any questions? Please read and sign the informed consent form, which further explains confidentiality and your rights. [Allow participant to sign two copies of the form]. Thank you.

As a reminder, your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable. Do you have any additional questions before we begin the interview?

I would like to thank you for taking the time to assist me with my research. Do I have your verbal permission to record this interview?

Questions:

Background Information

1. Tell me about yourself (name, hometown, major, class). Tell me about your family.
2. Was higher education discussed in your family? What did your family say about college?
3. So, what is it like for you being the first person in your family to attend college?

Identity and Critical Race

4. Can you describe in your own words your gender, race/ethnicity.
5. Talk about how you manage and negotiate race and gender (your multiple identities) as a student at this institution.

First-Generation

6. What did you know about the term first-generation student before attending college?
7. How did your first-generation student status influence you to attend an Ivy Institution? What did you think this Ivy Institution could provide for you as a first-generation student?
8. What has your experience been like as a first-generation woman of color at this ivy institution?

College experiences

9. Do you feel you fit into the culture here?
10. What support (if any) do you believe you needed to make your transition to college more successful? Who could have helped you?

Activities (Let's talk about activities)

11. What type of extra-curricular activities did you participate in high school? And describe your experiences in participating in extra-curricular activities
12. How did you become involved in cocurricular activities on campus? What is your level of participation?
13. Please talk about if members of your immediate social network participate in any of these cocurricular activities with you.
14. What do you feel like are the benefits from your participation in cocurricular activities?

15. Does your race or gender impact/play a part of your involvement in cocurricular activities?
16. What are the factors that determine if you will participate in a cocurricular activity?
17. What has been your experience (if you have had any) in a cocurricular activity with other students of color? What do you get out of participating in cocurriculars with students who look like you?
18. What has been your experience (if any) in a cocurricular activity when you are the only student of color (Or if there were a limited number of students of color). Is it a different experience?
19. Are cocurricular activities a source of support for you as an African American first-generation woman student? If yes, discuss the type of support you receive by participating.
20. What strategies have you learned from cocurricular activities that support you as a student of color?
21. Describe what your college experience would be like if you did not participate in cocurricular activities. Was there ever a time when you thought about not participating? What changed your mind?

Sense of Belonging

22. Do participating in cocurricular activities give you sense of belonging on this campus? Explain.
23. Explain if you influence other students of color to participate in cocurricular activities for your comfort level? Or do you support each other?

24. Are there any benefits socially by participating in cocurricular activities? Talk about the benefits.
25. What do you gain academically by participating in cocurricular activities?
26. How could this Ivy institution create sense of belonging for first-generation African American woman students through cocurricular programs?
27. Is your participation in cocurricular activities important to your success as a student at this Ivy institution? Explain why.

Black Feminist

28. What cocurricular support networks would you like to recommend be implemented at this institution?
29. You have shared some previously but as we begin to wrap this interview up, can you re-state how cocurricular programs have specifically assisted you in navigating your collegiate experience as an African American woman first-generation student at this ivy institution.
30. Explain if this Ivy encourages your participation in cocurricular activities as a first-generation African American woman student. Should it?
31. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your participation in cocurricular programs?

Thank you again for your time today. I am looking to interview at least 10 to 12 more students.

After all interviews are complete, I will schedule a focus group with other students who are participating in the research to discuss the findings. Do you have any questions? I look forward to seeing you again.

Appendix D

Participant Checking DocumentUNDERSTANDING HOW FIRST-GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS NAVIGATE THEIR COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE
THROUGH COCURRICULAR PROGRAMS AT ONE IVY INSTITUTION**Common Cocurricular Themes from the Individual Interviews**

- Friendship
- Community
- Sense of belonging
- Comfort
- Confidence
- Affirmation
- Mental health
- Self-care
- Self-awareness
- Self-discovery
- Support
- Fulfillment
- Inclusion
- Purposeful
- Encouragement (to each other)
- Fit (Physical health)
- Focused on academics
- Commitment
- Isolation/loneliness (when not participating)

Strategies learned from cocurricular activities

- Leadership
- Time management
- Networking
- Balance
- Voicing opinion/speaking out
- Listening
- Patience (in navigating blackness at ivy)
- Genuine/authenticity
- Self-care
- Professional development
- Focus on academics

Recommendations

- Mentorship program (with upper-class women and African American alumni)
- A program with a curriculum for First-generation African American women designed to meet their needs
- Financial support for First-generation African American women
- Collaboration with other Ivy institutions (or other universities in general) with their African American student groups
- Diversity training for all students (especially those in clubs and organization for a more inclusive environment)

Appendix E

Focus Group Interview Protocol Script

Hello and welcome to our focus group. It's good to see all of you. I appreciate your time and commitment to my research and this focus group session. I anticipate this group session will be more of an open discussion because I would like to hear from all of you. My expectation is that you will all have a chance to respond to the questions if you would like to (everyone does not have to respond to every single question, again unless you want to, I'm really looking for as much open dialogue as possible). The questions are related to some of the themes I have found in all of the individual interviews.

I need for you to sign a group informed consent form. It is all of the same information in the previous consent form but for this focus group session. As a reminder, your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any questions that you are not comfortable. Do I have your verbal permission to record this focus group session?

Please let me know if you have any questions before we begin. Finally, for transcription purposes, please state your name before you respond to a question. Example: Paryn. My opinion is that we have good cocurricular programs. Are you ready to begin?

Focus Group Interview Questions:

1. As first-generation students, many of you mentioned that your parents and family recognized you were good in school and pushed you attend college. What does their support look like now that you are an Ivy League college student? What about if you are close to graduation?
2. You were all very busy in high school and your family was aware and a part of all of the extra-curricular activities you participated in, do you talk to your family about the cocurricular activities that you are involved in now? If so, what do you tell them about your cocurricular activities?

Let's discuss themes from your interviews:

3. **Common goals:** Several of you mentioned you participate in cocurriculars because you liked the fact that you are working toward a common goal with other students. What is it

about working towards a common goal in cocurriculars with other students that helps contributes to your success as a student here?

4. **Community and sense of belonging:** As you manage your multiple identities, can you share how “having community” and sense of belonging in cocurriculars is important to you as first-gen African American women.
5. **Mental health and self-care:** In general, you may not think about how mental health and self-care are an important part of cocurriculars, but it was a reoccurring theme. Talk about how mental health and self-care are an important part of your participation in cocurriculars.
6. **Sister Circle (friendship, encouragement, affirmation):** Several of you talked about the friendship, encouragement, and affirmation you receive through your participation in cocurriculars with other African American women. (Please share the importance of friendship, encouragement, and affirmation to you in cocurriculars as African American first-gen women.) Why is this “sister circle” important to your success as a student?
7. **Isolation (loneliness):** A recurring theme was how isolating and lonely this Ivy can be and how cocurriculars are a source of support for you. Talk about if you anticipated the isolation and how you have used cocurriculars to help you move/work past the isolation. (can you give an example of a time you felt isolated and how cocurriculars were a positive influence for you)
8. In several of the interviews it was discussed that it was comforting and affirming for you as Black women to participate in cocurriculars with other women who look like you. Talk about how (and why) is this important to your success as a student here.

Strategies:

9. A few of the common strategies learned from cocurriculars included: leadership skills that will be transferable in the real world, time management, balance, listening skills, networking, patience, being genuine (authentic), and voicing your opinion. Please share your thoughts on why these strategies learned from cocurriculars are important to your success as a student at this Ivy. (Feel free to talk about other strategies that are also helpful to your success).

Recommendations:

10. Several of you mentioned cocurricular collaborations with other institutions. Do you know other first-generation African American women students at other Ivies or PWIs, and if so, what have they shared with you about their cocurricular experiences and support networks on their campuses?
11. In general, do you know what cocurricular programs and support services are offered to African American women students at other Ivies that would be successful here? (what do you think would work here?)
12. Another recurring theme was a Mentorship Program: Talk about what a successful First-Generation African American woman mentor program would look like at this Ivy. And how it (mentor program) enhance your collegiate experience.
13. Can you mention any other themes or attributes from cocurricular activities that attribute to your success as an African American first-generation student at this Ivy? Does anyone have any additional comments or remarks they would like to make?

I'm passing around a participant checking document that lists common themes mentioned by all of you in the individual interviews. Please read through the list and indicate with any type of pen

marking (check, circle, etc.) all of the themes that resonate with you or your identity with as being important to your success as a student here. Feel free to add/write in themes that aren't listed and you feel are missing.

Next, the strategies learned from all cocurricular activities are listed. Please again indicate the strategies that resonate most with you and write on the side of the list any additional strategies not listed.

Finally, at the bottom of page there is a list of suggested recommendations that would be helpful to first-gen African American women. Again, please indicate the recommendations that resonate most with you and again write on the paper other recommendations that you would like to suggest if it is not listed.

Thank you all for your participation in this focus group today. You are all awesome and I wish you only the best as you finish your education here. Once I finish my research, if you are interested, I will share the finished product with you. I will contact you by email. If you have any additional questions, comments, or concerns, please reach out to me. As a reminder, I will not use your names in the research, once the interviews have been transcribed, you will receive a pseudonym. If you spoke about specific names of organizations like the African dance group, I won't say the name of the group, only that it is an African dance group or a dance group. It has been my absolute pleasure talking to all of you. Thank you again and good luck with the rest of your semester. Before you leave, please sign this participant form to receive your gift card.

Appendix F

GROUP INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please read the following information carefully, as it outlines the scope and limitations of your participation in the proposed research study.

STUDY: Understanding How First-Generation African American Women Undergraduate Students Navigate Their Collegiate Experience Through Cocurricular Programs at One Ivy Institution

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: [redacted]

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S DEPARTMENT: [redacted]

Primary Researcher Leading the Research: Paryn A. Wallace

Research Purpose

- This research examines how cocurricular programs offered at one ivy institution provide support networks for African American women first-generation students to navigate their collegiate experience.
- The purpose of this inquiry is to close the gap in the research available about African American women students and the influences of cocurricular programs on their successful matriculation at one ivy institution.

Procedures

- The study will require you to participate in one individual interview, for approximately 60 minutes and one focus group for approximately 60 minutes.
- The individual interview will include questions related to your college experiences, including your involvement in cocurricular programs and how your involvement contributes to your collegiate experiences as a student.
- After all individual interviews are analyzed, you will participate in a focus group to review the research findings. The 60-minute focus group is designed to ensure that your voice has been captured appropriately throughout the research. Also, during the focus group, we will discuss group collective lived experiences.
- I will record, transcribe, and analyze each interview, and I will take notes while we conduct the interview.
- I am asking your permission to allow me to audiotape (sound) as part of this research study at both the individual interview and focus group.
- The recording(s) will be used for analysis of study data by the research team. The recording(s) will include your name and the content of the interview discussion. After transcription, your name will be deleted, and you will be identified by a pseudonym and the recordings will be deleted. If you say anything that you believe at a later point may be

hurtful and/or damage your reputation, you can ask that certain text be removed from the dataset/transcripts.

- The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file cabinet and linked with a code to subjects' identity and will be deleted after transcription.
- There will be approximately 12-15 individuals interviewed for this study, including you if you choose to participate.
- You should ask any questions you have about the interviews, the research, or the methods at any time, including while the interview is being conducted.
- Interviews will begin in late October/early November 2019.

Risks

- Participation in this study is voluntary. **You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you.** In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.
- Although participating in this research study poses minimal risks, you may feel uncomfortable during the interview. Should you need assistance managing your feelings after the interview, you should contact [redacted].

Benefits

- Possible benefits of this research include:
 - Gaining a deeper understanding of your collegiate experiences.
 - Gaining awareness of the many factors that shape your ability to navigate and persist in college.
 - Enhancing your ability to reflect critically on your experience at an ivy institution.
 - Your contribution to the body of work on African American first-generation undergraduate students in higher education.

Compensation

- There is no cost to you to participate in this study.
- Your participation is voluntary. You will receive a \$25 gift card for choosing to participate in both the interview and focus group.

Privacy and Confidentiality

- This research will be kept private. After transcription, your name will be deleted, and you will be identified by a pseudonym and the recordings will be deleted. This information will be stored in such a manner that minimal linkage between your identity and responses in the research exists. In the actual dissertation, you will be identified by a pseudonym. Please note that I will keep this information private by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location, specifically in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. Notes taken by hand during the interviews will be kept in a locked file cabinet.

- The interviews and focus group will be conducted in the [redacted] in a private room or similarly private location based on room availability. However, I cannot guarantee that no one will overhear the questions asked or your responses. Thus, I cannot guarantee confidentiality.
- The research team, my dissertation committee, and the Institutional Review Board at Rider University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, group results will be stated, and pseudonyms will be used.
- The data generated from this study may be used in future conference presentations and publications.

Questions

- If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact me:
Paryn A. Wallace
Doctoral Candidate
Rider University
The College of Education and Human Services, Memorial Hall
2083 Lawrenceville Road
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
Phone: 609-826-6972
Email: wallacep@rider.edu
- You may also contact my Rider University faculty advisor:

Dr. Tricia Nolfi, Assistant Professor
Rider University, The College of Education and Human Services
Memorial Hall
2083 Lawrenceville Road
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
Phone: 609-895-5636
Email: tnolfi@rider.edu
- If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator at Rider University:
Karen L. Gischlar, Ph.D.
Program Director and Associate Professor, School Psychology Program
Department of Graduate Education, Leadership and Counseling
Phone: 609-896-7751
Email: kgischlar@rider.edu

Alpha University Principal Investigator:
[redacted]

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if problems arise that you do not feel you can discuss with the Investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board at:
Assistant Director, Research Integrity and Assurance
[redacted]

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Participant (Print) _____

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Primary Researcher Signature _____ Date _____

Audio Recording:

With your permission, I would like to audio-record the interview. Please sign below if you agree to be audio-recorded.

I hereby give my consent for audio recording:

Participant Signature _____ Date: _____