

A Narrative Analysis of the Lived Experiences
of Nontraditional Black Female Students Who Attend
an Historically Black College or University

A Dissertation submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Curriculum and Instruction

In the Department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Technology
of the Dewar College of Education and Human Services

July 2018

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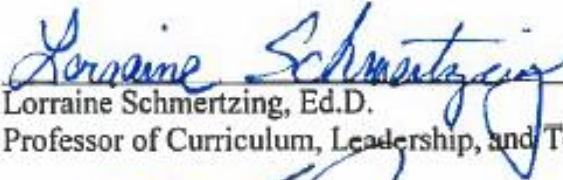
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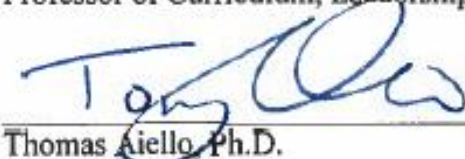
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ABSTRACT

This study employed narrative analysis within the theoretical frameworks of critical race feminism (CRF) and Black feminist thought (BFT) to explore the lived experiences of six Black female nontraditional students at an Historically Black University (HBCU). Data collected in this study came primarily from interviews with the participants but included observations and document analysis as well. Using connecting and categorizing strategies to organize the data into *a priori* and inductively generated themes resulted in a collective narrative that told the story of six Black reentry women. The presentation of data maintained the fidelity of the guiding theoretical frameworks by privileging the women's voices and allowing the stories of their lived experiences to serve as counter-narratives that resist persistent negative stereotypes of Black women in America. Findings from this study indicate that the Black reentry women who participated are committed to their education and determined to graduate but have had to navigate innumerable personal and institutional barriers to be successful in college. These women are most comfortable when in the classroom with others like them and indicate a lack of campus life programs in which they fit. Because the women are eager to enter their chosen career field, they appreciate rigor in curriculum and instruction, but believe the institution lacks the systems to appropriately support that rigor. Finally, the women have high expectations for immediacy and professionalism, but feel that the institution has overwhelmingly underdelivered. The implications for the institution are grim. When students leave the school with a lack of value in the institution, they are less likely to recruit others to the school or provide financial support as alumni. Several recommendations are provided to remedy these situations.

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Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks go out to the members of my committee, Dr. Richard Schmertzling, Dr. Lorraine Schmertzling, Dr. Melvin Shelton, and Dr. Thomas Aiello, who supported and encouraged me throughout the entire dissertation process. On my first day of class as a doctoral student, I met Dr. Richard Schmertzling, and I knew immediately that he would be my dissertation chair. I spent the next 4 years voraciously reading his suggested books and articles, and then reflecting on them with him in class or on the telephone. His influence on my dissertation, and more importantly, on my worldview, cannot be understated. As a bonus, I have had the pleasure of working with Dr. Lorraine Schmertzling, whose careful reviews of my work have led me to think deeply about the content of what I write, and especially my use (or underuse) of commas. I have become a more polished writer because of her influence.

Completing this dissertation also took the motivation and support of the members of the Fall 2014 Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral Cohort. The time we spent together in face-to-face classes created my fondest memories of doctoral school. I will never forget the good times we had in class learning, and ultimately, becoming doctors together.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the wonderful women—a Amber, Debbie, Kayla, Shaquita, Shontae, and Zoe—who graciously shared their very personal stories with me for the purposes of this study. These women spent many hours of their time sharing intimate details of their lives with me, and the impact of those stories will extend far beyond the reaches of this dissertation by informing my philosophy as a practitioner in higher education. More importantly, I am a better person because of what I learned from these women.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for supporting me through the many years I have been in college. I am finally finished! I would like to extend a special thanks to my husband, Joel, who has been my personal cheerleader in absolutely everything that I do. His belief in my ability to do anything I put my mind to has helped give me the confidence to achieve things I never thought possible.

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, the late James F. Sarver, Ph.D., whose educational accomplishments inspired my own.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

During my matriculation in a graduate history program, I discovered a passion for the history of African American people, specifically their plight to achieve equality in educational access, opportunities, and outcomes. I was inspired by their commitment throughout history to attain an education at any cost and their resiliency when they experienced constant setbacks. My master's thesis, which was at that time the ultimate manifestation of my fascination with Black history and the pinnacle of my educational achievement, traced the desegregation of schools in one South Georgia county, largely from the perspectives of students who had borne the burden of moving the process forward (McBride, 2011). This bottom-up approach to storytelling in history, much like counter narratives in critical studies, provides a perspective that challenges the dominant discourse.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, that thesis would ignite a fire within me to illuminate contemporary issues in education for African American students, again from the perspectives of the students themselves. From the moment I began my matriculation in the doctoral program at Valdosta State University, I knew I wanted to study issues relating to African American educational access, opportunities, and outcomes. Initially, I was generically interested in the opportunity gap in American education, and I spent the first year of my studies voraciously reading articles and books related to the gap and to

theoretical approaches that I could take to study it, without having a clear vision of exactly the study I wanted to undertake for my dissertation.

My inspiration for this study came from multiple conversations with a nontraditional Black female student at the historically Black university where I am employed—Dabny State University (pseudonym). Debbie (pseudonym) was a married grandmother majoring in social work who maintained a 4.0 grade point average (GPA) in her coursework. She was an incredibly determined student, yet she seemed to lack the self-efficacy needed to effectively complete writing assignments that were becoming increasingly difficult as she progressed through her coursework. Debbie came to me on several occasions for assistance with her writing assignments and during these tutoring sessions, our work-related discussions turned into conversations about her perceptions of attending a youth-oriented HBCU after transferring from a predominantly White junior college where most students were nontraditional. Her comments were often lamentations about the lack of quality interactions with faculty members and younger students, the hardships she faced in finding assistance with work when she needed it, and pedagogy she seemed to believe was ineffective for adult learners. It was during these casual conversations with Debbie that the idea behind this study was born as I saw a problem in what she was saying that needed to be addressed. Looking more deeply into the continual decline of HBCUs and the documented vulnerability in the literature on women like Debbie reaffirmed the significance of the problems Debbie experienced as a reentry student attending an HBCU.

Statement of the Problem

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created in the period following the end of the Civil War until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 (a period known as the Jim Crow era) as virtually the only option for Black students to receive a postsecondary education (Lovett, 2011). However, as years passed and access to higher education became more (but not completely) equitable, HBCUs began experiencing a decline in enrollment (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2014). With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that ended the era of legal segregation, the clientele who would normally attend HBCUs were able to enroll in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). By the end of the 1970s, only 35% of Black students still chose to attend an HBCU (USDOE, 2014). In recent years, this figure has dropped to a mere 8% (USDOE, 2014). Commenting on this precipitous decline in enrollment in an online *Newsweek* article on the contemporary importance of HBCUs, Nazarayan (2015) wrote, “Colleges without students do as well as airlines without passengers, and as Black students snub HBCUs, HBCUs face the first true existential crisis in their collective history” (para. 5). This decline, combined with inequitable funding and systemic leadership problems, has resulted in the HBCU becoming an endangered species in American higher education (Stodghill, 2015). Currently, 104 HBCUs exist in the United States, but that number is expected to drop more than half by 2035 with barely over a dozen actually thriving (Stodghill, 2015, p. 12). Because new HBCUs cannot be created, it is critical to maintain and improve the ones that exist so they do not become extinct.

For decades, HBCUs have experienced low enrollment, low graduation rates, and financial crises, the combination of which threatens their long-term survival (Nazaryan, 2015). Data for the 40 degree-granting, 4-year public HBCUs in the United States demonstrate the worsening plight of these institutions. The most recent data on total enrollment at these institutions show nearly a 7% decline over a 3-year period (USDOE, 2015a). The graduation rate for these HBCUs averaged less than 30%, far below the national average for PWIs in 2011 (USDOE, 2011). Moreover, with total expenditures nearly equal to that of total revenues, the financial outlook for these institutions is grim (USDOE, 2015a). As these data indicate, action should be taken to slow or reverse the continual decline of these institutions. If HBCUs are to remain relevant and premier institutions of higher education, they should recruit, retain, and graduate more students—the critical triumvirate for postsecondary institution survival (Lee & Keys, 2013). Because HBCUs are irreplaceable, these institutions could benefit from remodeling and restructuring themselves in order to reverse those trends.

One way that HBCUs can accomplish this trend reversal is by recognizing, embracing, and responding to diversity in student populations, particularly that of the nontraditional student (Collins, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Thomas, 2001; Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008). With nearly three-quarters of college students having at least one nontraditional student characteristic (USDOE, 2015b) and with these students, for various reasons, being among the most academically vulnerable students in higher education (Coker, 2003; LeSavoy, 2010; Markle, 2015; Merrill, Reinckens, Yarborough, & Robinson, 2006; Rosser-Mims, Palmer, & Harroff, 2014), HBCUs may reap huge rewards by increasing their

responsiveness to this population (Coker, 2003; LeSavoy, 2010; Merrill et al., 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Thomas, 2001).

Black female nontraditional students in particular are an academically vulnerable population. In addition to the interrole conflicts that nontraditional students of all ethnicities face (Markle, 2015), and the deeply embedded racism and sexism that Black women must combat regularly (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2008), these women also find a lack of cultural responsiveness in student-faculty interactions, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs and services at all types of institutions, all of which contribute to this population having low self-efficacy, difficulty succeeding academically, feelings of alienation and marginalization, and a higher rate of attrition than their traditional counterparts (Bonner, Marbley, Evans, & Robinson, 2015; LeSavoy, 2010; Murray-Johnson, 2013).

At the HBCU, the nontraditional student is typically a Black female who is at the intersection of multiple identities. It is important for faculty and staff to understand how the confluence of these identities impacts her matriculation experiences. Because of the increasing presence of academically vulnerable Black female nontraditional students on disappearing HBCU campuses, retaining these students until graduation will be mutually beneficial. In fact, in a report published online by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), Collins (2015) proposed that HBCUs should “embrace nontraditional students in college access and retention efforts and create a welcoming campus climate,” in order to survive in light of the continual decline over the last 50 years (para. 7). Faculty and staff should put forth effort to understand the lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of their diverse clientele in order to design culturally

responsive curricula, programs, and services (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Thomas, 2001).

Qualitative research is necessary to gain that understanding; however, there is a dearth of literature on the experiences of Black female nontraditional students who attend HBCUs (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

Faculty, staff, and administrators at HBCUs need to be responsive to the students whom they serve in terms of recruitment, pedagogy, course offerings, faculty-student interactions, and campus programs. Developing responsiveness requires a high degree of cultural competence, even within institutions where culture is seemingly shared (Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2014; Murray-Johnson, 2013). Because nontraditional Black female students are a growing population on HBCU campuses and as such, are an important constituency for these institutions, faculty, staff, and administrators should deeply understand the experiences, challenges, needs, and within-group differences of this population (Bonner et al., 2015).

The illumination of these traits can be found in scholarship that focuses on the women. However, as Winkle-Wagner (2015) pointed out in her meta-analysis of the literature on the success of Black women in college, existing scholarship “narrows down” the lives of these women in a number of ways. First, Winkle-Wagner (2015) explained that scholars failed to recognize the role that institutions play in Black women’s success. Furthermore, she pointed out that scholars have collectively ignored within-group differences among these women, instead largely recognizing them as a monolithic population. Finally, existing scholarship failed to account for personal definitions of success, which may be fundamentally different from scholarly definitions (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). With this in mind, I designed this study to use the complementary lenses

of critical race feminism (CRF) and Black feminist thought (BFT) and a narrative inquiry design to illuminate the lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of Black female nontraditional students at an HBCU in the southeastern United States.

The HBCU that serves as the setting for this study, a 4-year public HBCU in Southwest Georgia that I will call Dabny State University (DSU), is experiencing all of the aforementioned problems that are besetting other public HBCUs across the country. At DSU, enrollment declined for the sixth year in a row for the 2017-2018 academic year. Once ranked as the HBCU with the 7th highest graduation rate in the country (“Tracking Graduation Rates at HBCUs,” 2012), graduation rates at DSU are now on a steep decline. From 2011 to 2013, the 4-year graduation rate declined from 16% to 9% (USDOE, 2016). In that same time, the 6-year graduation rate fell from 42% to 31% (USDOE, 2016). The graduation rate may fall even farther in the upcoming academic year, mostly because of harmful open enrollment practices in previous years. Stodghill (2015), whose book explored the collective struggle of HBCUs to survive continued threats to their continued existence, argued that open enrollment, or the practice of not being selective in who gets admitted to the institution, has “handicapped” HBCUs and “destroy[ed] the brand” because well-prepared, high-achieving students do not want to attend school with low-performing students (p. 120).

Additionally, Dabny State University has experienced severe financial crises that threaten its very existence. As a state-supported HBCU, DSU relies on public funds to operate. Of the 47 HBCUs in the country that receive public funds, DSU ranked 6th in institutions that experienced the greatest loss in state revenues over the decade from 2004 to 2014, at a 22% loss (Toldson & Cooper, 2014). Furthermore, out of the 106 HBCUs

in the nation, DSU ranked 9th lowest in endowments with an endowment of only \$1.5 million, or less than 1% of the average for all HBCUs (Toldson & Cooper, 2014). These financial and other crises have necessitated a consolidation with a local regional degree-granting Predominantly White Institution (PWI), which was completed Fall 2017. Black leaders fought long and hard against this consolidation, part of what Stodghill (2015) characterized as a larger “schem[e]” that “conservative state legislators” have undertaken “to shut down or merge poor-performing public black colleges to save money” (p. 8).

Moreover, the percentage of students receiving federal financial aid further complicates DSU’s already precarious situation. In 2016, 97% of DSU’s students received some form of federal financial aid (USDOE, 2016). Of those, 73% received the Pell grant (USDOE, 2016). HBCU researcher Robert T. Palmer (2014), in articulating the need for more research that examines the experiences of Black HBCU students, wrote online that

HBCUs disproportionately admit students who are low-income, first-generation, and dependent on financial aid. Students who fall into one or more of these categories may face certain challenges, such as balancing the need to work part-time or full-time while attending classes to support their education or lacking access to cultural capital (e.g., knowledge and skills) to help facilitate their collegiate success. (para. 3)

Writing on behalf of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Toldson and Cooper (2014) argued that with so many grim statistics working against HBCUs, these institutions must act immediately “to find innovative ways to improve graduation and retention rates, while serving a majority Pell eligible

student body” (p. 9). For its future health and sustainability, Dabny State University should heed this call.

Actualizing any innovation to improve retention, progression, and graduation requires close attention to the constituents at the institution. At the time of DSU’s consolidation, large numbers of students at both institutions involved in the merger were women and many were considered nontraditional students. At DSU, 67% of students were females (USDOE, 2016). The gender parity at the PWI was even more imbalanced where women accounted for over 7 out of every 10 students (USDOE, 2016). At DSU, nearly one-quarter of the 3,316 undergraduate students were 25 or older (USDOE, 2016), the age at which students are considered nontraditional. That percentage was even higher at the PWI where nearly half of all students were of nontraditional age (USDOE, 2016). With a student body that is 90% Black or African American, nearly 70% female, and 24% over the age of 25, the likelihood of having Black female nontraditional students in classrooms is high; therefore, understanding and attending to their unique needs, experiences, and goals should be a high priority for faculty, staff, and administrators. Uncovering this understanding and sharing it with key constituents on campus became a goal of mine when I embarked on this dissertation.

With Dabny State University faced with declining enrollment, low graduation rates, and the resulting financial crises, the university has an opportunity to help reverse the trend by ensuring that its increasingly diverse population is supported as they work to reach their academic goals (Bonner et al., 2015; Markle, 2015). Specifically, the university should consider restructuring curricula, instruction, programs, and services in such a way that they are responsive to the diverse academic and social needs of the Black

female nontraditional student, a student whose academic vulnerability and increasing presence on campus warrants immediate attention (Bonner et al., 2015; Coker, 2003; LeSavoy, 2010; Merrill et al., 2006; Murray-Johnson, 2013).

Providing a supportive and nurturing academic environment for all students can come full circle and bring benefits to the institution whose continued existence is vital. The relevance of HBCUs in the post-*Brown* (1954) and Civil Rights Act (1964) era has often come into question because Black students are now free to attend any higher education institution they choose. As a result of integrated postsecondary education, many have suggested that HBCUs are no longer relevant as their initial mission was to make education accessible to students for whom it would be otherwise inaccessible solely on account of their skin color (Lynch, 2015). After a protracted struggle to establish and fund Black colleges and universities, the challenge became maintaining them.

Historically, HBCUs have faced challenges related to underfunding and understaffing, which threatened their existence. More recent efforts to minimize or eliminate their continued presence have taken the form of closings or consolidations, like the one at Dabny State University. Contrary to what these intentional threats may suggest about the contemporary relevance of HBCUs, these institutions continue to have a huge impact on the clientele they serve, despite the dwindling numbers of those students. Not only do these institutions graduate over 20 percent of Black college graduates, but they impact the individual and collective social and political consciousness of the Black students they serve and provide a safe space to explore that consciousness (Lynch, 2015; Wooten, 2015). As Melissa Wooten (2015) put it when arguing for the contemporary relevance of HBCUS, “If we as a society come to recognize that black

lives matter, then we must do the same for the venues that cultivate and nurture these lives as well” (para. 35).

Significance of Study

Despite their rising numbers on college campuses and their documented academic vulnerability (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Thomas, 2001), Black women are largely invisible in research relating to nontraditional students (Bonner et al., 2015; Thomas, 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Even less prevalent are studies examining their lives, experiences, and comfort within the educational space of the HBCU, and how the confluence of these factors affects their persistence and success in college. In summarizing the gaps in the literature on Black women in college, Winkle-Wagner (2015) made a strong case for a study such as the one I completed:

Future work should include qualitative approaches that allow students to describe their experiences within different institution types such as PWIs or HBCUs . . . [and] should consider the within-group differences in experiences among African American women. . . . For future studies that explore Black women’s within-group differences, Black feminist thought is an instructive theoretical framework, where arguments are made that Black women’s race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, and other identities should be considered simultaneously in analysis. More research is needed to compare the ways that race, gender, SES, or other categories connect with African American women’s experiences at PWIs and HBCUs. There are a variety of other within-group differences such as age or parental status that could matter greatly relative to Black women’s success in college. (p. 193-4)

This study provides insight into the perspectives of the women themselves regarding their backgrounds, lived experiences as HBCU students, and what support they consider necessary from faculty and staff to help them achieve their academic goals. It also illuminates the within-group differences of Black female nontraditional HBCU students to understand how those differences impact the perceptions these women have toward their matriculation through, comfort in, and success at their HBCU. In doing so, this study has hopefully filled a clearly identified gap in the existing scholarship on Black female nontraditional HBCU students (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

By putting the spotlight on Black female nontraditional HBCU students, this study is not only filling a gap in the literature, but it is also providing institutions with critical insight into the lives, diversities, experiences, and needs of one of their most academically vulnerable populations. Even in institutions where the administration, faculty, staff, and students seem to have similar cultural backgrounds, within-group differences exist in terms of region, age, class, sexual orientation, parental status, and religion (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). These differences may be ignored or overlooked, leading to an institution-wide lack of responsiveness. This unresponsiveness has repercussions for individual students in terms of their academic needs and comfort at the school. Students who do not make satisfactory academic progress or who experience alienation within their campus environment are less likely to persist in school (Markle, 2015). I used my findings to make recommendations to the institution on how to be responsive to diverse Black female nontraditional students, which could potentially improve enrollment, retention, and graduation rates, all of which are in precipitous decline.

Improving the responsiveness of HBCUs to Black female nontraditional students could have a widespread impact at the individual, institutional, and community levels. Supported students are more likely to persist and graduate, which helps them meet their academic, personal, and professional goals (Markle, 2015; Tinto, 1993). In doing so, the institution is also improving retention and graduation rates. This leads to more graduates, which creates the type of strong diversified regional workforce that companies desire when locating to an area. In order to achieve the cultural responsiveness necessary to create such an impact, higher education institutions bear the responsibility to fully understand the students they serve. In a recent study highlighting the experiences of Black female nontraditional students at an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), Bonner, Marbley, Evans, and Robinson (2015) noted the lack of institutional responsiveness toward Black female nontraditional students that results from a lack of understanding about these diverse women. In challenging the academy to take action, Bonner et al. (2015) asked:

With the proliferation of diverse student populations and the many permutations they bring in their demographic profiles, the question should be, “How can we become more things to more people?” The African-American female undergraduate is but one group in this population that necessitates us asking this question. The issue now becomes, what will be our response? (p. 50)

With this study, I provided the institution with critical insight into the lived experiences of an important, yet often overlooked, segment of the student population—Black female nontraditional students. In doing so, the institution will be more informed and in a better position to actively respond to the needs of these particular academically

vulnerable women and create the conditions necessary to positively impact the university, the students it serves, and the community of which it is an integral part. By deeply understanding this subsection of its clientele and proactively designing responsive curricula, pedagogy, and programs and services, the institution is taking a critical step toward recruiting, retaining, and graduating diverse students, all of which are necessary for its continued existence. Stodghill (2015) articulated the contemporary importance of HBCUs quite simply when he wrote, “It is hard to imagine a single greater threat to the future of African Americans than the demise of its higher education system” (p. 11). In conceptualizing this study, I set out to answer four overarching research questions about the experiences of six Black reentry women who represent an important constituent of students at Dabny State University.

Research Questions

To fill a clearly identified gap in the literature, provide insight into the experiences of Black female nontraditional HBCU students from their perspectives, and offer recommendations for the institution on how to best meet the needs of this population, I completed this qualitative study in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

Question 1. What experiences and values influenced Black female nontraditional students to enroll and persist at an Historically Black University in the Southeast?

Question 2. How do Black female nontraditional students experience the campus culture at an Historically Black University in the Southeast?

Question 3. What components of the Historically Black University do Black female nontraditional students consider responsive to their social needs?

Question 4. What types of instructional methods, course offerings, and campus programs do Black female nontraditional students consider most responsive to their academic needs?

These research questions went through several iterations as I framed the conceptual basis for my study. Conversations with members of my target population, experiential knowledge from working at the institution, and existing literature about Black reentry women influenced the development of these four research questions that undergirded the present study.

Conceptual Framework

The work of Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) informed the construction of the conceptual framework for my study. Their idea of a conceptual framework takes a truly holistic approach to conceptualizing a study by considering the experiences and background of the researcher as an important influence on the qualitative study (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). For this reason, my educational, professional, and personal schooling experiences became strong influences in conceptualizing my study. The work of key authors in the field and central theoretical frameworks also informed my conceptual framework. Finally, conversations with members of my target population stimulated my thinking about possible theories and became—as Maxwell (2013) would call them—thought experiments, which are important pieces of a conceptual framework.

This dissertation largely reflects interests that have grown out of my educational and professional experiences. As a nontraditional student, I studied history extensively in both my undergraduate and graduate degree programs. In doing so, I developed an

interest in African American history that ultimately led to a desire to work toward social justice for traditionally marginalized populations, specifically with regard to equality in educational access and outcomes. This desire manifested itself in my choices of employment in majority-minority institutions and the study that I conducted here.

As a former nontraditional student, I experienced the feelings of marginalization and alienation that came with attending a youth-oriented university and the challenges associated with fulfilling so many roles concomitantly. While my peers were living on campus, attending study groups, and enjoying college life, I worked full time to support two children on my own. Although my peers and I were close in age, this major difference in responsibilities made me feel different, which significantly impacted my matriculation experience, particularly in my freshman and sophomore years of college when I failed several courses and ended up with only a 2.77 GPA.

Despite my initial challenges, beginning in my junior year and continuing through my master's and doctoral coursework, I managed to earn mostly As and only two Bs. I attribute my success to support from my husband, who I met in my sophomore year, and the interest I had in my major courses. As a history student, I found the subtopic of African American history the most fascinating, so I focused most of my research in that area, including my master's thesis. As a result, I developed a strong background in African American history, which has given me insight into the historical attempts of Black students to gain equality in educational access and outcomes and how historic exclusion from educational institutions has morphed into contemporary issues of marginalization.

This passion grew into a desire to work for social justice on behalf of African American students. My entire professional career consists of working alongside traditionally marginalized populations in minority-serving educational institutions at the secondary and postsecondary levels. This immersion gave me insight into how societal, institutional, and individual oppression work to continue marginalizing these students, which has driven my desire to work for equality in educational access and outcomes for these populations.

Currently, I work as an administrator at an historically Black university where, in a previous position, I worked extensively with nontraditional Black female students. In that position, casual conversations grew into the idea behind this study. Conversations with members of what would become my target population provided me with preliminary insight into their experiences in higher education and their perspectives on institutional responsiveness to their academic needs. These conversations were critical in conceptualizing my study. Because of these conversations, I had an epiphany about my dissertation topic and began to read extensively on the topic of nontraditional Black female students.

Because my target population is mostly invisible in the literature, I initially read articles salient to nontraditional students, regardless of ethnicity. However, I quickly realized that White and Black women have different experiences as nontraditional students, so I pushed the extant literature aside and focused on what was directly related to Black female nontraditional students. The most influential work contributing to the conceptualization of my proposed study has been *Sistah's in College: Making a Way Out of No Way*, in which Juanita Johnson-Bailey (2001) used Black feminist thought (BFT) as

her theoretical framework and narrative analysis as her methodology to illuminate the experiences of eight diverse reentry Black female students. Although Johnson-Bailey (2001) laid the groundwork for a previously understudied field, a thorough review of existing scholarship, corroborated by Rachelle Winkle-Wagner's (2015) meta-analysis of related literature, demonstrated that still not enough is known about the within-group differences of Black female college students and how these differences affect their matriculation experiences. Winkle-Wagner (2015) called for more qualitative research to uncover that information by accounting for their intersectionality and within-group differences, which I did with my study.

The academic vulnerability of diverse populations like Black female nontraditional students cannot be properly addressed without research that specifically examines their matriculation experiences within institutions of higher education (Bonner et al., 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Because this research must be specific to their experiences, it requires theoretical lenses that privilege the voices of the women themselves and recognize the intersecting oppressions under which they live (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). In reading the literature, I noticed a pattern regarding the theoretical frameworks that researchers use to examine the experiences of Black women. As evidenced by existing scholarship (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Winkle-Wagner, 2008, 2015), critical race feminism (CRF) (Wing, 1997) and Black feminist thought (BFT) (Collins, 2009) are particularly useful theoretical frameworks for research focusing on Black women and were key features that guided my research design.

In reading more deeply into these frameworks, I began to understand how certain lenses allow researchers to examine a particular population and present the results with

fidelity. Critical race feminism, a theoretical framework for studying, analyzing, and presenting the experiences of Black women, grew out of critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and operates under several premises, which I relied on when conceptualizing the study presented here. First, CRF holds that racism is endemic and ever-present in society (Wing, 1997). While I would argue that Black people in HBCUs cannot be outwardly racist toward one another or to White people because they lack the power necessary for racism to manifest, the existence of internalized racism may very well factor into the way my participants perceive themselves as students and may also impact the culture of the institution. Second, CRF functions to critique society through the use “of storytelling and narrative analysis” (Wing, 1997, p. 3), which is precisely the methodology I selected for this study. Finally, CRF eschews dominant theories that minimize the impact of race, gender, and class on people’s lives in favor of intellectual traditions like feminism (Wing, 1997), which also guided the way I conceptualized and designed my study.

A fundamental tenet of CRF maintains that the oppression of women operates differently depending on race (Wing, 1997), which is why I selected the complementary theoretical framework of Black feminist thought (BFT) to guide my study. BFT functions with the goal of achieving social justice by empowering Black women’s voices and challenging intersecting oppressions related to race, gender, and class (Collins, 2009). The effective challenge to intersecting oppressions cannot occur without highlighting the existence of those oppressions as experienced and perceived by the women themselves (Collins, 2009). For this reason, I made the exploration of

intersectionality and within-group differences by empowering my participants' voices through storytelling a key feature of my study's design.

I used a critical race feminist approach to understand how the intersection of race, gender, and class impacted the experiences of the Black female nontraditional students who participated in my study by giving voice to the women and allowing their experience and their reflections on their experiences to inform my recommendations to hold institutions accountable for transforming and/or maintaining curricula and programs that are responsive to the needs of these students. BFT draws attention to the idea that Black women face multiple oppressions concomitantly, including racism, sexism, and classism (Collins, 2009). BFT calls for the transformation of institutions to create social change and eradicate oppression based on race, class, and gender, which relates to my practical goals for completing this study. A core tenet of BFT includes giving voice to and empowering Black women, which is evident in my intellectual goals (Maxwell, 2013) and the co-constructing of narratives that I did with the participants in my study (Collins, 2009).

After talking with members of the target population, reading related literature, and considering the theoretical frameworks, I constructed an "appropriate and rigorous" conceptual framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 5). I did this by first writing research questions that related the relevance and significance of the study to the current situation of the HBCU in the higher education environment and the plight of one of its most academically vulnerable populations. Also, in keeping with Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) and Maxwell's (2013) prescriptions, my research design aligned my goals, research questions, conceptual framework, and methodology. By continually integrating all the

components of my design, I ensured that the data I collected would provide me with the information I needed to effectively answer my research questions, which is a necessary aspect of what Ravitch and Riggan (2017) considered “appropriate and rigorous” (p. 5). Finally, I purposefully chose my analytic approach—narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014; Riessman, 2008)—for its suitability in answering my particular research questions and its fit with CRF and BFT.

Research Goals

Because my study included the collection and presentation of my participants’ fascinating stories, I had to remain focused on my goals so that I did not lose focus of the purpose of my study (Maxwell, 2013). To maintain the focus on, achieve the stated purpose of, and justify and identify potential threats to my study, I incorporated Maxwell’s (2013) approach to my research design and outlined personal, intellectual, theoretical, and practical goals for my study.

The initial idea behind the proposed study was largely motivated by my personal goals, and it ultimately shaped into a study that furthered my commitment to examining and explaining stories behind the quest for equality in educational access and outcomes by traditionally marginalized populations. The study also helped me more deeply understand how these women must constantly consider their multiple identities as they navigate through an educational space where one might expect them to be most comfortable. As an administrator in the registrar’s office at an HBCU that serves these women, this critical insight into their experiences has helped me better meet their needs as students at this institution.

Intellectually, the study helped explain how six Black female nontraditional students function in the patriarchal, youth-oriented HBCU campus culture and what they need from faculty and staff to help them meet their academic needs from their unique perspectives. These findings and the recommendations that resulted from them, if actualized, have the potential to advance the newly written mission of the university to “respect diversity in all its forms and give all students the foundation they need to succeed” (DSU, 2016) by allowing faculty and staff to create responsive interactions, curricula, programs, and services for diverse groups of students, including Black reentry women.

Importantly, and particularly with regard to the justification for my study, my theoretical goal was to fill a gap in the literature on diverse Black female nontraditional students in general, and more specifically, on their experiences in the educational space of the HBCU. As demonstrated by the literature review, a major gap exists in the literature on this topic. For me to achieve this goal, I had to remain focused on the topic. While this did not require me to force my participants into telling stories solely about their experiences on campus, I entered into the interviews with a guide that focused on those experiences (See Appendices A, B, and C for a list of sample questions) and my data analysis began with *a priori* categories that came from theory and the literature that are related to the topic.

In a practical sense, the study resulted in curricular and programmatic recommendations for HBCUs that will hopefully help these institutions better meet the academic needs of Black female nontraditional students as recommendations were based on the perspectives of the women themselves. These practical goals were useful for

helping me maintain my focus as I conducted the study and analyzed the data. Although Maxwell (2013) urged researchers not to design the study or write the research questions based on the practical goals, I did have a research question that was related to the practical goals inasmuch as I am interested in learning from the participants what they need from faculty and staff to achieve their goals.

To effectively frame my study and provide support for the importance of conducting it, I comprehensively surveyed literature related to the collegiate experiences of women students, with an intentional focus on Black women. My analysis of that literature is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I present an analysis of literature related to nontraditional students with an intentional and specific focus on Black reentry women. Where they could contribute depth to my analysis, I included studies that examined college experiences for other constituencies, such as reentry students of other ethnicities, Black male students, and Black female traditional students. In surveying the literature related to my topic, I found that it could be organized into the following themes—enrolling and persisting in college, challenges as students, within-group differences, and cultural responsiveness.

The face of the typical college student changed dramatically over the past several decades, with nontraditional students constituting an increasingly larger proportion of the student populations on college and university campuses across the nation. A variety of definitions exist for nontraditional students, but for the purposes of this study I used the definition from the United States Department of Education (USDOE), which characterizes students as nontraditional if they have at least one of the following characteristics: financial independence, parents or caregivers, without a high school diploma or have delayed matriculation at least 6 years past high school, over 24 years old, or employed full-time or attending school only part time (2015b). By that definition, the USDOE estimated that nearly three-fourths of all undergraduates were nontraditional in 2014, a number that has been growing steadily over the previous 2 decades (2015b).

For nearly 3 decades, women have outnumbered men in the overall undergraduate student population and the USDOE expects that disproportionality to increase even more over the next 10 years (2015a). As of Fall 2013, the national college student gender breakdown was at 56% and 44% respectively (USDOE, 2015a). By 2024, the USDOE projected that female undergraduate enrollment will increase by 15% while male enrollment will increase by only 9% (2015a). In addition to outnumbering men in the overall student population, women also outnumbered men on many nontraditional characteristics extrapolated by gender—55% were financially independent, twice as many had dependents, over twice as many were single with dependents, and slightly more undergraduate women did not possess a high school diploma (USDOE, 2015b). One-third of those women reported having at least one dependent, with Black women being more likely to have more than one (USDOE, 2015b). Black students were also more likely than White students to have a mixed enrollment status, meaning they predominantly attended college part-time (USDOE, 2015b). The inherent difficulties in being a nontraditional student in a traditionally-oriented environment lead to academic and personal challenges for this population of students (Markle, 2015), which is further complicated when a nontraditional student identity is combined with being Black and female (Bonner et al., 2015; Coker, 2003; LeSavoy, 2010; Thomas, 2001; Watt, 2006). Much of the existing scholarship does not fully explore the experiences, perspectives, and needs of Black female nontraditional students and instead focuses mostly on nontraditional students who are White or male.

Recent literature on Black female students, some of which is specific to nontraditional students, reveals several points of interest. First, Black female

nontraditional students are motivated to attend and persist in college for intrinsic reasons, including personal transformation and the desire to be a role model for their families and communities (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kimmel et al., 2014; Markle, 2015; Thomas, 2001; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Second, Black female nontraditional students are at the intersection of multiple identities, which they must often attempt to divide in an effort to succeed academically in institutions of higher education (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008, 2015). Third, Black female nontraditional students are not a monolithic population; therefore, insight into within group differences (such as socioeconomic status, age, and cultural identity) can help educators understand the experiences and backgrounds that these students bring to the classroom, which they can use to make learning experiences and their interactions with students more responsive (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Markle, 2015; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Thomas, 2001; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Finally, Black female nontraditional students will remain an academically vulnerable population until institutions actively arrange courses, programs, services, and interactions with students so that they are culturally responsive and sensitive to the unique needs of this population (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Merrill et al., 2006; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b; Thomas, 2001).

Enrolling and Persisting in College

In two studies that I read, Black female nontraditional students identified a variety of reasons they chose to attend college, despite the many challenges associated with being a nontraditional student (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). In her seminal work on Black female reentry students, Johnson-Bailey (2001) contended that the reasons the

women in her study returned to school were not for any of the reasons identified in the literature where they were rendered invisible in favor of White middle-aged women. This invisibility in the literature demonstrates the importance of using a Black feminist theoretical framework that places these women at the forefront of inquiry while simultaneously addressing issues of race, gender, and class.

A desire for personal transformation, family inspiration, and community improvement all served as sources of motivation for Black adult women to enroll and persist in college (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The eight reentry women in Johnson-Bailey's (2001) interview-based study in the southeastern United States indicated that they went back to school because they wanted to realize deferred dreams to attend and graduate from college, do better than their mothers, and for the possibility of achieving a better life for themselves and their families, even though economic improvement was not guaranteed. Coker (2003), expanding upon Johnson-Bailey's (2001) educational narratives, explored the motivations of 10 African American female adult students to enroll and persist in college in the midwestern United States. Like the women in Johnson-Bailey's (2001) study, Coker's (2003) participants were motivated to enroll and persist in school to improve themselves, their families, and their community despite the challenges arising from their positionality.

The desire for personal transformation appears in the literature on why nontraditional female students are motivated to return to and remain in school, and this desire seems to cross racial lines. In his study of 10 mostly White nontraditional students, Chen (2014) found that adult learners enrolled in college out of a desire for transformation. Similarly, Johnson-Bailey (2001) found that the women in her study

reentered college partially for the transformation that would occur as a result of earning a degree. The women in Johnson-Bailey's (2001) study wanted to feel important, improve their self-esteem, and realize deferred dreams. Johnson-Bailey (2001) found that because their motivations for returning to school were so strong, the reentry women in her study would stop at nothing to achieve their dream of attaining a college education. Similarly, Vaccaro and Lovell (2010), in their work with 28 nontraditional women of various ethnicities, found that their participants remained academically engaged in college partly because of a desire for self-improvement. Vaccaro and Lovell's (2010) contention that women's motivations for enrolling and persisting in college are deeply personal and rooted in a desire for transformation supports a concept recently referred to in the literature as self-investment (Markle, 2015).

In addition to seeking personal transformation, nontraditional Black female students returned to school in order to set an example for their families and communities (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kimmel et al., 2014; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Johnson-Bailey (2001) noted that the women in her study reentered school because they wanted a better life for themselves and their families. In her work with 10 African American female college students, Coker (2003) found that her participants were motivated to attend school to develop themselves, their families, and their community. More recently, in a larger study involving 530 adult college students, Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2014) found that students' motivations and barriers for attending and persisting in college differed by race and ethnicity. While families were influential in the desire for nontraditional students to enroll and persist in college, Black students were more likely than White students to be encouraged by their families, especially as it

related to being a role model for their children, thus supporting Coker's (2003) findings (Kimmel et al., 2014).

According to Johnson-Bailey (2001), previous research on nontraditional students identified families as a reason that women disengaged from college because of the interrole conflict that came with being a mother and student, but more recent research contradicted those findings when several authors identified family as a source of support to reentry women (Kimmel et al., 2014; Markle, 2015; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). While Johnson-Bailey (2001) noted that the women in her study were motivated by the possibility of a better life for their families, the women sometimes encountered resistance and resentment from family members. For the women in Johnson-Bailey's (2001) study, the negative response from family members did not inhibit their motivation to enroll and persist in college in their present reentry experience. In her work with nontraditional students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI), Markle (2015) found that these students experienced moderate to high levels of interrole conflict, which when combined with several other factors significantly predicted whether these students withdrew from or persisted in college. She also identified a number of gender-specific factors that influenced the will to persist among nontraditional students, one of which was to be a role model and source of financial support for their families. Similarly, Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) found that the nontraditional women in their study remained academically engaged because of familial support and inspiration.

Given that only two studies explored the reasons Black women in particular chose to attend and persist in college in light of the many challenges they faced as nontraditional students, and that most of the women in these studies attended

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001), a major gap in the literature exists on this topic with regard to this specific population and the various types of postsecondary institutional settings that they may attend. This study hopefully begins to fill that gap in the literature by including an exploration of the experiences that led Black female nontraditional students to choose to enroll and persist in an HBCU.

Challenges as Students

The many challenges that Black women face as nontraditional students complicate their entry into college as well as their matriculation experiences. The challenges include a lack of recognition for their unique positionality (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Watt, 2006), feelings of alienation and marginalization (Bonner et al., 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2001), and interrole conflict (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Markle, 2015; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Faced with these challenges, these women may disengage and either fail to live up to their academic potential or withdraw from college (Bonner et al., 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Markle, 2015), or they employ coping strategies that allow them to persist and eventually graduate (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

Matriculating in college is inherently difficult for Black female nontraditional students because they are at the intersection of at least three identities—Black, female, and nontraditional—that are routinely ignored in the halls of the academy as well as in the literature (Bonner et al., 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Johnson-Bailey (2001), as the first to explore the many ways that race, gender, and class combined to impact Black women's matriculation experiences, demonstrated the

necessity of using qualitative feminist research to study this population. Winkle-Wagner (2015) later reiterated this necessity in a meta-analysis of the literature where she examined 119 studies relating to Black women's college success. Because being Black and female is unique only to Black women, research that does not explicitly focus on them cannot provide insight into their experiences and challenges as students to inform higher education institutions on how to respond to their needs.

As Johnson-Bailey (2001) and Winkle-Wagner (2015) pointed out in their studies, research on Black women has essentialized them, likening their experiences to those of either Black men or White women and rarely considering the uniqueness and complexity of their experiences as Black women who navigate the world in the face of concomitant racism and sexism, and sometimes, classism and ageism. Recognizing that Black female nontraditional students are at the intersection of multiple identities, several contemporary researchers examined the ways these students must attempt to divide their identities to succeed academically in institutions of higher education (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm, 2010; LeSavoy, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Many of these studies used Black feminist thought (BFT) or critical race feminism (CRF) as theoretical frameworks for their recognition of intersectionality and their exploration of how oppression continues to affect the daily lives of Black women, particularly in the college classroom (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008, 2015).

Nontraditional students of all ethnicities must wrestle with identity development, thus complicating their experiences in college. In her work with 23 nontraditional

students, Kasworm (2010) found that adult students co-constructed positional and relational identities as undergraduates in a youth-oriented collegiate environment. The adult students in Kasworm's (2010) study demonstrated that adopting a student identity is a highly complex process involving their own personal life stories and multiple adult-oriented roles and their social interactions with youth-oriented students, faculty, and staff. In her predominately White sample of men and women, Kasworm (2010) neglected to account for how race and ethnicity can impact identity development for nontraditional students. Black female nontraditional students are also negotiating an educational space where they are alienated because of their age to form their student identities but have the added complexity of being in two historically marginalized populations, which may further complicate their identity development (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

Nontraditional Black female students who are at the intersection of gender, age, and race are likely to find themselves in a classroom environment that may not be oriented to this particular positionality, which may negatively impact their educational outcomes (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b). Coker (2003) found that Black women, because of their positionality, faced a number of challenges as adult learners, including interrole conflict, racism and sexism, and marginalization; therefore, they had to employ a number of coping strategies to reconcile the challenges they faced. The coping strategies that Coker (2003) identified—humor, silence, compromise, excellence, and confrontation—expanded upon those that Johnson-Bailey (2001) drew from her narrative analyses on Black reentry women, which included silence, negotiation, and resistance. LeSavoy (2010) reiterated the same in her narrative

of one at-risk nontraditional Black female student in which she concluded that marginalized Black women like the one in her study, because of institutional oppressions related to the intersections of race, class, and gender, may not easily achieve success in higher education, especially when that success is societally and institutionally—and not personally—defined.

No matter the educational space in which the Black female nontraditional student may find herself, she must find ways to reconcile her identity. In her work with 30 Black college women at a PWI, Winkle-Wagner (2008) found that the Black women in her study self-regulated their cultural behaviors and identities in an effort to appear more appropriate—that is, more in accordance with the behavior of a White woman—in the White-dominated, patriarchal academic environment. Similarly, even in the majority-minority environment of an HBCU, Black female nontraditional students must reconcile parts of their identity, which has negative implications for their academic success (Watt, 2006). In surveying 111 Black female HBCU students, Watt (2006) found that the Black women at the HBCU she selected for her study's setting constantly considered their identity as females because of the patriarchal nature of the institution. In considering Watt's (2006) conclusions, it seems that even though HBCUs are designed specifically to meet the needs of Black students, the effects of the patriarchal structure on the Black female identity necessitate programs, services, curricula, and instructional strategies that recognize and support multiple identities of all students, which will result in better educational outcomes, specifically the retention of academically vulnerable populations until graduation. Both Watt (2006) and Winkle-Wagner (2015) clearly indicated the Black women in their studies found it difficult to compartmentalize their multiple

identities, and subsequently they needed an educational space where they could be comfortable with being Black and female at the same time. This evidence provides a compelling argument that institutions and individuals must consider the indivisibility of Black women students' identities (Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008).

In an effort to fill this gap in existing scholarship on the ways that intersecting oppressions create challenges for Black female nontraditional HBCU students as they matriculate through college, I designed and undertook a qualitative study that employed critical race feminism (CRF) and Black feminist thought (BFT) in the collection, analysis, and presentation of narrative data. Because these theoretical frameworks highlight the within-group differences of Black women, the resulting findings can provide faculty, staff, and administrators at the institution with the type of understanding needed to create the welcoming, responsive classroom environment and campus culture that have the best potential to negate the challenges these women face as students.

Within-Group Differences

Research undergirded by Black feminist thought (BFT) functions to highlight within-group differences in the traditionally marginalized and essentialized population of Black women (Collins, 2009). Winkle-Wagner (2015) demonstrated in her meta-analysis that existing research on Black women in college failed to account for their within-group differences. Failure to recognize and understand within-group differences, such as age, parental status, sexual orientation, linguistic diversity, religious affiliation, and nationality, precludes a deep understanding of these women. Black women are not a monolithic population; therefore, insight into the within-group differences that exist in this population and how they impact the women's matriculation experiences will help

educators design more responsive learning experiences for their diverse students (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Murray-Johnson, 2013). Highlighting the experiences of nontraditional Black female students will demonstrate the need for cultural responsiveness in higher education that recognizes the multiple intersections of this marginalized and academically vulnerable population (Coker, 2003).

Gendered analyses of the experiences of nontraditional students exist, but may not address issues of race or ethnicity, thus failing to account for within group differences in this population. Markle (2015) surveyed a total of 494 male and female nontraditional students of varying ethnicities (but mostly European American) at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) in an effort to identify factors that lead to persistence in her sample of students in order to inform program creation. While her population was of mixed ethnicities, Markle (2015) did not describe how ethnicity may predict the factors that led to persistence or withdrawing. I believed racialized and gendered analysis of a target population of nontraditional students at an HBCU that also considers within group differences would illuminate their specific motivations and needs in their particular educational space to inform program creation tailored just for them was important and therefore my study, in part, did just that.

In one study I read, the authors conducted a gendered and racialized analysis of the engagement of Black HBCU students but did not consider age as a factor (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). In their work with 1,167 Black students at 12 HBCUs, Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004) found that female students were as academically and socially engaged as male students on the campuses. Although this study was unique in its focus on HBCU campuses, it did not account for within-group

differences by gender, specifically differences in age (Harper et al., 2004). Exploring the academic and social engagement of nontraditional female students at an HBCU as I did in my study demonstrated that these women were not as engaged, especially with regard to social activities. I concluded that because high levels of engagement would likely prevent the feelings of marginalization and alienation that this population reported as a result of attending youth-oriented institutions (Bonner et al., 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Markle, 2015).

Another study focused specifically on the diversity within the Black female student population, and while the author demonstrated the cultural differences among these women, similar to Harper et al. (2004), she did not consider the impact of age (Murray-Johnson, 2013). In her autoethnography, Murray-Johnson (2013) explored cross-cultural misconceptions among Black female students in higher education. Murray-Johnson (2013) argued that Black women were not a monolithic group; rather, they were ethnically and culturally diverse, which impacted their matriculation experiences. Like other studies focusing on Black women in college (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b; Thomas, 2001; Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008), Murray-Johnson's (2013) study focused on her experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), leaving a large gap in the literature on the within-group differences of Black women at HBCUs where the proportion of this population as part of the student body is significantly higher and presumably, even more diverse than at PWIs. This diversity is another reason all stakeholders should consider culturally responsive pedagogy and programs in higher education.

Cultural Responsiveness

In order to appropriately reach all students, help them meet their academic potential, and make education truly transformative, faculty and staff in institutions of higher education should make a consistent and concerted effort to implement cultural responsiveness in instructional strategies, curricula, course offerings, interactions, and programs and services. Actualizing cultural responsiveness requires a deep understanding of how race, culture, ethnicity, and other constructs—such as sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status—impact the lives and matriculation experiences of diverse students (Gay, 2013).

To help Black female nontraditional and other diverse students succeed academically, educators should design instruction that draws on their motivations for attending college. Chen (2014) concluded that adult learners only considered their learning experiences transformative when courses were based on adult learning principles. Chen's (2014) sample was small and had virtually no ethnic diversity. I conducted a study with a specific focus on Black female nontraditional students at an HBCU and provided insight into what this population considers transformative learning experiences and effective pedagogy to meet their academic needs. My findings with Black reentry students were like Chen's (2014) conclusions about what pedagogies led to transformation with his population of mostly White students.

Combining a variety of instructional methods with culturally responsive pedagogy enhances the likelihood of positive academic outcomes for nontraditional students. In their work with HBCU faculty, Merrill, Reinckens, Yarborough, and Robinson (2006)

found that empirically-grounded curriculum and technology-based instructional methods can be employed to retain nontraditional students, a group known for its high attrition rate. The use of technology in their study allowed the nontraditional students to work around their schedules and fostered feelings of inclusion, which is critical in retention (Merrill et al., 2006). Instructors should consider the many roles that nontraditional students fill when designing instruction to fit their needs, which Merrill et al.'s (2006) findings support.

In her qualitative study of 15 Black female nontraditional students, Sealey-Ruiz (2007b) concluded that because of their positionality, these women responded well to culturally relevant curriculum. Critical race feminism (CRF) holds that the intersectionality of being Black and female leads to oppression as these women function in a White patriarchal society (Wing, 1997). Because CRF maintains that the institutions operating within that society are responsible for understanding the needs of Black female students and modifying the curriculum accordingly (Wing, 1997), using culturally responsive pedagogy should improve academic outcomes for these women, which recent studies support (Murray-Johnson, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b). Although HBCUs are not typically White-dominated institutions, they are usually patriarchal and Black females in the school are usually considered homogenous and are essentialized to have the same experiences as Black males, all of which could negatively impact their educational experiences (Murray-Johnson, 2013; Watt, 2006). If this then holds true at HBCUs, then it seems to me that culturally responsive pedagogy, because it accounts for intersectionality and within-group differences when designing and delivering instruction, should help remedy the marginalization and academic vulnerability of Black female

students. As Murray-Johnson (2013) demonstrated in her autoethnographic study, using dialoguing—a form of culturally responsive pedagogy that considers the ethnic and cultural diversity of Black women when creating opportunities for personal interaction—in higher education furthered cultural understanding among diverse students like herself. Future studies that explore the diversity of Black female nontraditional students—such as the study that I conducted—would likely support the use of culturally responsive practices to enhance the educational experiences of this population.

In addition to faculty designing accessible and responsive curriculum, institutions should also be accommodating and responsive in the services they provide for ethnically diverse nontraditional students. In a study involving 15 Black male reentry students, Rosser-Mims, Palmer, and Harroff (2014) found that these students faced several barriers to reentry into and graduation from degree programs, including a lack of role models; difficulty navigating the financial assistance program; and trouble managing the balance between school, work, and home lives. Rosser-Mims et al. (2014) identified what this population of students needed from higher education institutions in order to succeed and made several institutional recommendations that could serve the needs of Black male reentry students. A similar study that highlights the experiences of Black female nontraditional students could provide institutional recommendations that will better serve the needs of this population of students, which is what I did with my study.

Actualization of cultural responsiveness in education cannot occur without a deep understanding of the students (Gay, 2013). It is my belief that this level of understanding requires extensive and systematic qualitative research that focuses on the lived experiences of the students while accounting for their within-group differences, which as

Winkle-Wagner (2015) pointed out for Black female nontraditional students is best accomplished using Black feminist thought (BFT) as a theoretical framework. Currently, not enough research of this type exists in the literature (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). My study helped to fill that gap by using BFT to study the matriculation experiences of an oft overlooked cohort in higher education—that of the Black female nontraditional student.

Summary

Black female nontraditional students will likely remain an academically vulnerable population until institutions actively arrange courses, programs, services, and interactions with students so that they are culturally responsive and sensitive to the unique needs of this population (Chen, 2014; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Merrill et al., 2006; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b). By considering the motivations that Black female nontraditional students have to enroll and persist in college; the intersectionality, positionality, and indivisibility of their identities and the challenges they face in college as a result of those; and the many differences among members of this population, educators can design culturally responsive instruction to smooth this group's matriculation through and graduation from college (Chen, 2014; Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Kasworm, 2010; Kimmel et al., 2014; LeSavoy, 2010; Markle, 2015; Merrill et al., 2006; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007b; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010; Watt, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

While studies focusing solely on Black female nontraditional students are few (Bonner et al., 2015; Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2007b, 2013), they have in common the framework

of Black feminist thought (BFT), which empowers the voices of the women and creates rich and robust studies of their experiences in college. The obvious gap in the literature lies in the failure to address the matriculation experiences of these women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Out of the eight women involved in Johnson-Bailey's (2001) groundbreaking study on Black reentry women, only one attended an HBCU. Merrill et al. (2006) conducted their quantitative study on the use of technology to retain nontraditional students at an HBCU, but in working predominantly with faculty the researchers failed to privilege the voices of the students.

Understanding the experiences that led to Black female nontraditional students enrolling and persisting in their HBCU could provide faculty and staff at the institution with valuable information that they could use toward creating new recruitment and retention strategies aimed at that specific population. Moreover, insight into the challenges that Black female nontraditional students face at HBCUs could inform institutions on how to adequately structure courses, curricula, programs, and services that adequately respond to those challenges. Finally, highlighting within-group differences in a seemingly monolithic population and demonstrating the complexity of their intersectional beings is a critical step toward helping HBCU faculty and staff deeply understand the students whom they serve. Research of this magnitude, which I undertook in this study, is absent from the literature but necessary if the institution hopes to respond to this academically vulnerable institution in a way that leads to successful outcomes not only for the women, but for the institution itself. To that end, the next chapter provides the reader with an explanation of the methods I used to carry out my study and answer my research questions.

Chapter III

RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the research design that I used in my study. The conceptual framework described in Chapter 2 influenced my research design, but the final design represents the end result of several iterations that it underwent as I collected and analyzed data. As I tweaked my research design, I continuously referred back to my four overarching research questions, my goals in completing the study, my conceptual framework, and potential validity threats to ensure their alignment as Maxwell (2013), whose book on designing qualitative research guided my efforts, instructs.

I chose to undertake a qualitative study because of its deeply personal nature, its attention to meaning-making in context, and its openness to inquiry (Patton, 2015). In considering the goals, purposes, participants, research questions, and theoretical frameworks for my study and my own background as a researcher, narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013; Daiute, 2014; Riessman, 2008) became the obvious methodological choice for guiding data collection and analysis and presentation of results. My interest in narrative inquiry began as I was combing the literature on my topic and found Juanita Johnson-Bailey's (2001) book, *Sistahs in College*, in which she used narrative inquiry to highlight the experiences of eight Black women who had returned to college as nontraditional students.

A distinctive feature of narrative inquiry is the collection of stories from individuals about their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). This study focused on the lived experiences of six Black female nontraditional students who attend an HBCU from the perspectives of the women themselves. Lived experiences in qualitative research refer to the varied ways different people experience the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), which in this case is attending a youth-oriented HBCU as a nontraditional female student. To explore the participants' lived experiences, the researcher had them comprehensively reflect on their perceptions of the time they spent within the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994).

Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to present the unique lived experiences of a small group of individuals as a collective story without losing the distinctiveness of each participant's story. Furthermore, the collaborative relationship between the researcher and the participants inherent in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013) complements a distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought (BFT), which is the privileging and empowerment of Black women's voices (Collins, 2009). As Collins (2009) pointed out, "the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences" (p. 39). Human experience is communicated through storytelling, which is at the heart of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013; Daiute, 2014; Patton, 2015). In turn, narrative inquiry allowed me to explore and contextualize how my participants made meaning of their individual experiences (Patton, 2015). Creswell (2013) noted the importance of situating participants' stories within their experiential, cultural, and historical contexts when using narrative inquiry. The setting for this study

encompasses all of those contexts and provided an important backdrop for how the participants made meaning of their reentry experiences.

Setting

The present study took place at a 4-year public HBCU in Southwest Georgia that I have called Dabny Sate University (DSU). With a population of 77,434 in 2010, the city where the school is located is the largest city in Southwest Georgia and the 8th largest city in the state of Georgia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Along with DSU, two other postsecondary institutions existed in the city at the time the study took place—a state college (with which DSU recently consolidated) and a technical college. The state college had a larger student population than DSU and the expectation was that when the consolidation was complete, the student body would total approximately 9,000 students, making the new university one of the largest postsecondary institutions in Southwest Georgia. Unfortunately, post-consolidation enrollment dropped precipitously and is currently under 6,000 students.

The purposeful, deliberate selection of this setting allowed me to illuminate the experiences of Black female nontraditional students at an HBCU, which is important because most of the existing literature that does focus on Black female nontraditional students examines the experiences that this population has at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Also, because I already had access to the institution, I had considerable knowledge about the school and was able to more easily access and establish research relationships with my participants. While I do work at the institution, I work in the registrar's office where my direct contact with students is minimal. Furthermore, DSU exemplifies the crises besetting many other public HBCUs in the

nation and especially the other two public HBCUs in Georgia that are of similar size and demographic. As a result, findings from my study may be useful for these institutions. Prior to beginning the study, I obtained an exemption from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the participating institution as well as my home institution (see Appendices D, E, and F). Upon receiving IRB approval from both institutions to conduct my study, I immediately sought volunteers from the current study body to participate.

Participants

I used a purposeful selection technique called maximum variation sampling to choose the individuals who could help me investigate my research questions (Patton, 2015). This sampling strategy allowed me to construct a diverse sample from the total population and identify common themes as well as uniqueness and differences about their experiences within a common setting (Patton, 2015). Seidman (2013), whose approach to interviewing guided my data collection, said “maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies” (p. 56). The small number of students I included allowed me to sufficiently capture the diversity within the population while also producing rich, detailed narratives about their individual experiences (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

To find potential participants, I used a reporting tool called Argos that pulled data from the institution’s Student Information System (SIS) to identify a broad range of students based on age, ethnicity, gender, and undergraduate status. Because my study focused on the experiences of Black female nontraditional students, participants had to have undergraduate student status, be over the age of 25 (or if under the age of 25, be

classified as an independent student), and identify as Black or African American and female.

I emailed all students who met these minimum criteria and invited them to participate in my study. To associate myself as a researcher from Valdosta State University, I used my VSU student email address, but in the interest of full disclosure I also identified my position at the HBCU. In the email, I included a description of the study, an overview of what students could expect by participating, and my contact information in case students had further questions (see Appendix G). My email yielded seven nontraditional Black female students who volunteered to participate in the study, which was within my original goal of six to ten participants. Of these seven volunteers, six became participants in and completed the present study. After pooling my participants, I immediately moved into the data collection phase of my study.

Data Collection

The collaborative and complex nature of narrative inquiry required me as the researcher to become deeply involved in the data collection process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013). In this study, stories served as the data from which my participants and I co-constructed narratives for analysis (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Riessman, 2008). In-depth interviews served as the primary form of data collection. Riessman (2008), whose approach to narrative analysis partially guided my data analysis, emphasized the importance of “repeated conversations” with participants in order to construct narratives. Therefore, I followed Seidman’s (2013) approach and planned three 90-minute interviews with each participant (See Appendices A, B, and C for a list of interview questions).

I initially had seven participants volunteer and began the interview process for this study with all seven. One participant stopped participating after the first interview and despite two attempts to reach her by email, she never responded. Of the six remaining, five participants were able to participate in three separate interviews. One, who worked full time at night and attended school full time during the day, requested to combine interviews two and three together, so we spoke for just over 2 hours during that session in order to cover all questions and topics in the interview guide. She agreed to be available by email after that interview in case I needed to follow up for clarification.

I used data gathered in the first phase of interviewing (see Appendix A) to answer my first research question. In this interview, participants relayed their life histories. In the second interview (see Appendix B), participants described their experiences at the HBCU (Seidman, 2013), which helped me answer the second and third research questions about their perception of and comfort in the campus culture. Data from this interview also revealed participants' experiences at the HBCU that allowed them to persist despite the challenges that they face, thus helping me answer the first research question. Finally, during the third interview (see Appendix C), participants reflected on the meaning of the stories they told (Seidman, 2013). From this data, my participants and I co-constructed narratives that answered my fourth research question, in which we determined how their experiences impacted their perceptions of what they need from faculty and staff at the institution to help them meet their needs.

Secondarily, I collected data through field observations, document analysis, and researcher memos. Creswell (2013) pointed out the importance of layering stories with "multiple types of information" (p. 74). Furthermore, Riessman (2008) suggested that

“working ethnographically with participants in their settings over time offers the best conditions for storytelling” (p. 26). To accomplish that end, I conducted three observations in four of my participants’ classes over the course of the semester with permission from their instructors. I also visited the homes of two women in my study where they showed me the places they did their schoolwork and where they displayed the awards, certificates, and diplomas they have earned while in school. Field notes from these observations supplemented the data collected in interviews and allowed me to create detailed explanations of the scene when I wrote the narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To further layer the data, I analyzed texts like course curricula, program documents, and institutional publications. This type of data is important because, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) pointed out, it provides the context for the study and is essential for structuring the narrative. Finally, I kept a researcher journal where I recorded memos (Maxwell, 2013) throughout the data collection process. Person-specific information recorded in the journal was identifiable only through the pseudonyms that I assigned to each participant in order to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

I did not complete an in-depth analysis of the data until all interviews were completed as Seidman (2013) instructs, although I did reflect on the data during the collection phase and as I was transcribing the interviews by writing memos in my researcher journal (Maxwell, 2013). These preliminary analyses allowed me to reflect on the data while it was fresh on my mind from the interview and became useful later when I needed to recall my initial thought processes about the data. I transcribed interviews before going into subsequent interviews so that I could consider information that needed

further exploration and to determine if follow-up questions were needed in subsequent interviews or via email.

As the first step of data analysis, I turned my recorded interviews into physical data by transcribing each interview to a Microsoft Word document. I had recorded my interviews on a password-protected iPhone 6 Plus using a recording application and then downloaded the audio files onto my password-protected MacBook where I also saved my transcriptions. Writing analytic memos during the transcription process allowed me to reflect on the conversations I had with my participants, and they also became data for later analysis.

After listening to the interviews and transcribing them verbatim, I organized the data so that I could work with a tangible version of the data to become more intimately familiar with them. To do this, I printed all the interview transcripts and organized them into a large three-ring binder in alphabetical order by the participants' pseudonyms and then in the order each interview took place. Although I had already participated in the conversations and then listened to and transcribed the recordings, I wanted to become even more familiar with the texts, so I followed Seidman's (2013) approach and read and reread the transcripts, marking passages of interest that I thought may be useful to include as potential narratives. As I read, I also wrote notes in the margins. When I felt compelled to write something more, I stopped and wrote an analytic memo to facilitate and stimulate my analytic thinking about the text.

After reading and rereading the transcripts, I realized that each woman told her life story in a similar fashion, with a clear trajectory from childhood to the decision to enter or reenter college, which lent well to Seidman's (2013) idea of crafting vignettes to

present interview data. The life history vignettes are used to set up the subsequent narratives that restory the women's experiences at the HBCU so that the reader understands the backgrounds of the women and how their backgrounds impact their matriculation experiences. My goal was to craft a life history vignette for each participant that would demonstrate the varied paths each woman took to becoming a reentry student.

I thought it was important to present their life histories, considering their deeply personal nature, as a vignette because I was able to “present the participant in context . . . and convey a sense of process and time, [which are] central components of qualitative analysis” (Seidman, 2013, p. 122). Moreover, restorying the stories the women told into a framework that makes sense (in this case a chronological framework) is a distinguishing feature of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013). It was also important to me to present their life histories in the women's own words, thus honoring and empowering their voices as they shared their often heart-wrenching stories with the readers, an important tenet of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009).

Following Maxwell's (2013) prescription for connecting analysis, Creswell's (2013) emphasis on restorying in a sensible chronological framework, and Seidman's (2013) approach for creating vignettes, I then read the texts with the express purpose of constructing a vignette to convey each participant's life history. To do this, I used Microsoft Word to duplicate the original transcripts, where I highlighted excerpts for inclusion from the complex, fragmented stories about their lives the women had relayed in their interviews. I cut those excerpts from the duplicated transcripts and pasted them onto a new Word document then formed them into a more linear storyline that allowed

me to make sense of the life experiences that led them to the decision to enroll at the HBCU (See Appendix H for a sample excerpt of how life history vignettes were crafted). I then read the stories again in order to reduce the data further. As Seidman (2013) warned, this reduction of the data proved difficult because it meant I had to part ways with large chunks of interview data. As I reduced the data, I kept only those excerpts that I considered “most compelling,” per Seidman’s (2013) instruction, so that I could ultimately present a rich narrative vignette of each woman’s life history.

As I constructed the life history vignettes using the women’s voices to tell their stories, I often stopped to memo about the ways that their stories were similar and different to each other (see Appendix I for a participant comparison chart) and how they fit into existing literature about Black reentry women. I also read back through articles and books relevant to Black reentry women to refresh my memory on related literature so that I could memo about how my participants’ stories fit into the broader context. As I was constructing my narratives, I began jotting down possible coding categories to go along with the *a priori* categories that I extracted from the literature to use in my next phase of analysis.

Still following Maxwell’s (2013) and Seidman’s (2013) approaches to data analysis, I then moved into categorizing analysis in which I coded the remaining data related to the women’s experiences in college and organized them into themes. My goal in this phase of analysis was to create a comprehensive narrative about the women’s collective experiences as nontraditional college students at the HBCU. This analysis required additional reading and rereading of the transcripts so that I could code and

categorize the data and generate themes based on patterns and connections in the codes and categories (Seidman, 2013). (See Appendix J for the complete coding matrix.)

To do this, I created a code system within MAXQDA based on *a priori* categories that I found in the related literature and other categories that I generated from marking excerpts in my initial reading of the data. The *a priori* categories I found in the literature included life's critical moments, coping with challenges, being a role model, institutional barriers, interrole conflict, and mentoring/maternal role. Those that I generated from reading and rereading the transcripts were the decision to attend the HBCU, selecting a major, perspectives on the institution, and factors supporting persistence, both institutional and non-institutional.

In MAXQDA, I color-coded the categories and grouped them, which allowed me to see more abstract themes forming as I coded the data. As I read the transcripts again within MAXQDA, I marked excerpts according to the *a priori* categories. I also used open coding to inductively capture new categories (Maxwell, 2013). Coding allowed me to identify patterns within and among the stories my diverse participants shared, from which I drew conclusions (Patton, 2013). I also used these categorizing strategies with related literature, textual data, field notes, and researcher memos.

In conducting thematic analysis, I generated themes that mirrored a story and allowed me to present a narrative that would carry the reader through the collective journey of the reentry experience of the Black women in my study. The major themes I created from coding the data included: experiences precipitating reentry (subthemes: life's critical moments, coping with challenges, outside encouragement), values influencing reentry (subthemes: having a career, being a role model, having an

education), the decision to attend the HBCU (subthemes: convenience, family connection), selecting a major, roadblocks along the way (subthemes: institutional barriers, interrole conflict), the women as students, the institution (subthemes: instructors and the curriculum, overall experience), campus culture (subthemes: helping each other, mentoring/maternal role, comfort level on campus), and persistence (subthemes: institutional and non-institutional factors supporting persistence) (See Appendix K for the code system in MAXQDA).

Presentation of Data

The research questions guiding my study also guided the presentation of my data (Daiute, 2014). In telling the collective story of my participants' reentry journey, I answered the following research questions, which I elaborate upon in the summary of the study:

Question 1. What experiences and values influenced Black female nontraditional students to enroll and persist at an Historically Black University in the Southeast?

Question 2. How do Black female nontraditional students experience the campus culture at an Historically Black University in the Southeast?

Question 3. What components of the Historically Black University do Black female nontraditional students consider responsive to their social needs?

Question 4. What types of instructional methods, course offerings, and campus programs do Black female nontraditional students consider most responsive to their academic needs?

Ultimately, the goal of collecting and analyzing several individual stories was to weave them into one coherent narrative that effectively captured the complexity of my

participants' experiences as nontraditional HBCU students in order to answer my research questions (Creswell, 2013; Daiute, 2014). I accomplished this by constructing a narrative about my participants' lives in a way that restored and gave meaning to their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013). Essentially, I transformed my analyses of their stories into insights that comprise a narrative that hopefully made a valuable and original contribution to the existing body of knowledge (Daiute, 2014). Because any conclusions are more trustworthy if one can demonstrate how they were constructed, I presented the stories my participants told in their interviews in a way that maintained the appropriate contexts and complexities of those stories while maintaining transparency about my analysis by explaining how I arrived at my conclusions (Creswell, 2013; Daiute, 2014).

My research questions implied that I would present my data in a way that maintained the integrity of the individual stories while still sustaining coherence across the narratives by identifying patterns in the meaning my participants made of their experiences. For this reason, my presentation included large segments of participants' stories as evidence of patterns I found in the analysis similar to the presentation Johnson-Bailey (2001) used in her study. I used Maxwell's (2013) strategies for connecting the data to construct these narratives.

Because of the nature of my study—the sampling of members of one group rather than stakeholders at various levels in the institution—I looked for and presented patterns of similarity, difference, and coherence within and across my participants' stories (Daiute, 2014). Maxwell's (2013) strategies for coding the data helped me find these patterns because as I coded the data, categories and themes began to develop, which

allowed me to see how the participants' experiences aligned with or contrasted from each other.

The research questions guiding my study were questions of existence for a traditionally marginalized population, in that they were designed to gauge how my participants made meaning of their personal experiences as Black female nontraditional students attending an HBCU. For this reason, the presentation of my findings focused on the participants' explicit statements about the interplay of race, intersectionality, marginality, and alienation at the university, among other themes, all of which were inductively developed from the analysis.

My findings are presented in such a way that the individual stories that my participants told remain largely in their original context but have been chronologically and thematically restoried, an important feature of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Similar themes appeared across narratives in the cross-case analysis, so I integrated the stories together into one coherent narrative about the experiences of Black female nontraditional HBCU students. To maintain my focus in the presentation of findings and ultimately make an argument about what my findings mean, I focused on data that answered my research questions.

The first arrangement of data in Chapter IV presents a life history vignette of each of the women as they told them to me in our interviews (Seidman, 2013). The stories are told in the women's voices, using the women's words, and include the conversational speaking patterns as I interpreted them during the transcription of each interview. I provided a brief profile and some contextual information before and after each life history. All of my words are italicized. I also bracketed and italicized the clarifying

questions I asked participants and included those when context was necessary for clarity. I replaced all names in the narrative with a pseudonym. I redacted specific places and only described them with a generic description or a pseudonym.

Working in enrollment management along with my own college experiences as a student taught me that the matriculation process generally follows a linear trajectory from interest to admitting to attending to graduating. This professional and experiential knowledge, coupled with theming the data (Saldaña, 2009), resulted in a second presentation of data found in Chapter 5 that compared and contrasted each woman's reentry journey from the time she decided to reenter, through her admission process and actual matriculation, and finishing with where each woman is now, which for some is graduated. In this way, I analyzed and restoried the women's experiences to weave together a collective, holistic narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013; Daiute, 2014; Riessman, 2008) of the matriculation experiences of six Black reentry women at an HBCU using the voices of the women themselves (Collins, 2009). Although this study relies largely on participant voices, as a researcher I was deeply involved as an instrument of research; therefore, a discussion of reliability and validity is warranted.

Reliability and Validity

A qualitative study is only as good as its reliability and validity (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) provided strategies to address reliability and validity including disclosure of "assumptions, biases, [and] connection to the . . . participants of the study," triangulation, and member-checking (p. 21). Maxwell (2013) has a more comprehensive

list of validity checks that adds long-term involvement with participants, the collection of rich data, and comparison, all of which I used in the present study.

Based on my personal experiences as a nontraditional student, my professional experience working with Black women at an HBCU, and the knowledge I gained from reading literature related to my topic, I developed a theory about what I thought these women experience as students. In addition to my personal experiences, my political background could shape how I restoried my participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013). These preconceptions could have colored my interactions with the participants in my study and possibly affected the interpretations I had of the data and the resulting conclusions. For this reason, it was important that I addressed validity threats to my study by including strategies that acted as a check on those threats. Maintaining fidelity toward the tenets of my selected theoretical frameworks—critical race feminism (CRF) and Black feminist thought (BFT)—provided an important check against validity threats in my study. However, to better increase validity and reliability, I included other checks as well. In doing so, I hoped to strengthen the trustworthiness of my study and the credibility of my findings (Maxwell, 2013).

My biases as a researcher threatened the validity of my study because they affected my interpretation of the data during the collection and analysis phases of the research process (Maxwell, 2013; Peshkin, 1988). Acknowledging the value of Peshkin's (1988) work, Connelly and Clandinin (1990), reiterated by Creswell (2013) and Maxwell (2013), added that the researcher's subjectivities impact the writing of the narrative as well; therefore, as a researcher, I had to be aware of the effect of my subjectivities as I planned, conducted, and presented my study. Peshkin (1988) urged researchers to

identify, understand, and address their subjectivities throughout the research process and then disclose them to readers in the presentation. In his example, Peshkin (1988) identified his subjectivities by noting his feelings during data collection and analysis. Before I began my study, I preemptively identified and addressed my subjectivities and continued to monitor for these and others as I actively engaged in the research process.

Borrowing from Peshkin's (1988) idea of subjective Is, I identified my first subjectivity as the Feminist I, though I could also consider this subjectivity the Social Justice I because it manifests as a desire for equality in opportunities between men and women. I identify strongly with women and other minorities, which explains my choice of research topic. My quest for social justice for underserved and traditionally marginalized populations, especially women and African Americans in education, had the potential to cause me to see institutional oppression where it may not exist or exaggerate its impact on the women in my study.

In the early phase of my study, I also definitively identified my Independent I, which grew out of my early years as an only child to a single father and then as a single parent myself. Aside from my children, I do not identify strongly with family as a source of support or inspiration, particularly with regard to my experiences in college because I enrolled in, matriculated through, and often struggled with college independently, pushed by my intrinsic motivation to achieve. Because of this subjective I, the possibility existed that I may have neglected to address or consider familial support that nontraditional students so often indicate pushes them into and through college or to overemphasize self-motivation as a factor in my participants' collegiate success.

Finally, I identified the Nonreligious I, which is perhaps the strongest subjectivity I possess. I notice in everyday interactions with coworkers, friends, and family members that I routinely avoid conversations related to religion, especially the organized type, because of my negative opinion towards its impact on individuals and the masses, believing it is more responsible for oppression than any political entity seeking power. This subjectivity could have manifested in my downplaying or disregarding a potentially strong source of strength for my participants. Relating to my Independent I and Feminist I, the Nonreligious I would minimize any outside influence on behavior and attribute success to the women themselves.

To address those biases, I layered my data collection sources by including diverse participants in my study and implementing a variety of data collection methods, a method known as triangulation (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). I compared interviews with observations in order to triangulate. This strategy of triangulation is important because my data analysis methods allowed me to use evidence to construct themes relating to the experiences of my target population at my setting. Without layering multiple sources of data, I risked making associations that might not apply to this group of students (Maxwell, 2013).

Consistency across multiple sources of data and explanations for discrepancies where they may exist enhanced the credibility of my findings (Patton, 2015, p. 662). I also checked for internal validity by considering the narratives within the context of existing related literature (Merriam, 2002). This validity check is like Maxwell's (2013) idea of comparison. Although my participants were fairly homogenous, I was able to compare their experiences with those of women like them in the literature. Their

experiences as reentry Black women were not unlike those of women in other studies in terms of the reasons they returned to college and the difficulties they faced because of their positionality in society and their multiple roles. The use of comparison was also an important check against the validity threat of reactivity, which refers to the impact the researcher has on the participants, particularly in interview studies like mine where I am the researcher and employed at the institution (Maxwell, 2013).

As a member of the culture of power conducting cross-racial research, it was necessary that I employ member-checking—or what Maxwell (2013) called respondent validation—to allow my participants to review transcripts, categories, and conclusions to confirm or refute what I presented (Patton, 2015, p. 668). This check on validity was especially important for my study because Black women have often been ‘othered’ in the literature, so it helped ensure that my participants’ voices remained empowered in the narratives that I presented in my study (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013; Johnson-Bailey, 2001), which was also a component of my theoretical framework from BFT (Collins, 2009). Furthermore, respondent validation provided me with an important perspective on how my biases could have impacted how I interpreted the data I collected (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013).

I used member-checking throughout my study. After transcribing the interviews, I provided the transcripts to the participants to read and ensure that the transcription matched the message they intended to convey in our interviews (Merriam, 2002). I also discussed my early interpretations with participants in subsequent interviews to make sure that I was understanding and capturing their experiences accurately (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). Only one participant, Debbie, asked to change data from her interview

and that was related to her early life history. She retold an excerpt of her early life history and submitted it to me via email, which became part of the data for analysis.

As I began to construct narratives for the presentation of data, I provided excerpts to the participants and allowed them to review my findings for accuracy (Merriam, 2002). The search for truth is never a goal in narrative inquiry and it was certainly not my intention; instead, I intended to recreate their reality through the presentation of the data I collected about their matriculation experiences (Daiute, 2014). Member-checking served as an important strategy for insuring that I focused on and accurately captured how the women made meaning of their experiences. All of the participants agreed with my interpretation and presentation of their experiences.

The concept of transferability was an important measure of validity for my study but is something that readers will be able to assess as they read the study and determine the relevance at similar institutions with similar populations. To accomplish this, I needed to present rich, detailed narratives that I created based on long-term observations and regular, intensive interviews with my participants (Maxwell, 2013). Rich data (Maxwell, 2013) and thick descriptions (Patton, 2015) assist with transferability because the women themselves provided accounts of their schooling experiences, and I included in-depth information about the participants at my institution so that others in similar contexts and conditions would be able to make inferences about the applicability of my findings to their situations (p. 719). In considering the concept of transferability as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) described it, I strived for an invitational and explanatory narrative, one that allows readers to live vicariously through it to imagine their own situation and apply the findings accordingly.

Chapter IV

AN EXAMINATION OF PARTICIPANTS' LIFE HISTORIES AND THE EXPERIENCES AND VALUES THAT INFLUENCED THEM TO REENTER COLLEGE AT AN HBCU

Many studies exist in the literature that focus on the reentry experiences of women or other minority students (Chen, 2014; Gay, 2013; Kasworm, 2010; Kimmel et al., 2014; Markle, 2015; Merrill et al., 2006; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010; Watt, 2006) and a small number focus exclusively on Black reentry women (Bonner et al., 2015; Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; LeSavoy, 2010; Murray-Johnson, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2007b, 2013), but what this study adds is the specific focus on Black reentry women's experiences at the Historically Black College or University (HCBU). Each of the women in this study ended up at the same place at the same time, with four of them in the same major—at an HBCU in the southeastern part of the United States (referred to in this report by the pseudonym Dabny State University), but the paths that took them there were incredibly varied. This chapter includes a life history vignette of each woman who participated in the present study (Seidman, 2013), using the women's own words, but restoried chronologically by the researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013). The stories involve a trajectory that carries the reader from each woman's early childhood, continuing through her prior schooling experiences, and finishing at her decision to enroll at the HBCU. As they recount their experiences, the women weave in the values, attitudes, and beliefs that influenced them to

pursue a college degree at this point in their lives, which helped me answer my first research question.

Brief Life Histories

My call for participants resulted in seven women volunteering for my study, six of whom completed the entire study—Amber, Debbie, Kayla, Shaquita, Shontae, and Zoe—who generously shared their life stories and college experiences with me for this study. My hope in forming my sample of participants was that the women in my study would be diverse, and as their life histories demonstrate, my hope was fulfilled. While the women are from different backgrounds and have varied life experiences and values, I was able to inductively identify common themes throughout their life histories, to include hardships, sacrifice, and a hope for a better future.

Amber

Amber is a quiet, mild-mannered 27-year-old woman who centers her life around her immediate family and her education. Raised in a close-knit family of four, Amber's mother and father home schooled her as a child and she never attended a public school until she went to college. Amber's close bond with her immediate family, forged tightly during the hardships they have survived, is evident throughout her story.

I'm from here, [southwest Georgia]. I was born [near Atlanta]. A few years after [my mother and father] got married, they moved there and had me and my sister. I got an older sister. She's 3 years older than me. I'm 27, she's 30. My dad was in law enforcement for a little over 2 years. He was a police officer. And then I think a little after, he worked up in Atlanta and he had some other jobs, but then he let it go cause

folks, they wasn't paying him. [My parents] had a hard time [in Atlanta], that's why he backed out [of working in Atlanta].

It was really rough up there. Plus, I was a baby. I was about a year old. My sister, she was about 4 years old, so it was hard for them up there to buy food and get other stuff done 'cause you know they had to catch the bus, catch the train, you know, do all that. So, then they moved back down here when I was 2 years old, so of course, that's where I grew up at, down here. I also have an older brother, but it was from my dad's previous marriage. He didn't grow up in the house with us. He was way older, like 17 years older. But we came down here and me and my sister was homeschooled by my mother and father. They taught us all through, like from preschool on up to high school. We graduated through homeschool.

My mother, she the one did the teaching. My dad did a lot of the work. My mother taught us basically all the way up. He worked. My mother, she worked a little bit. When she did work, he taught us, so they alternated. She had a job, but she let it go to teach us. They both teach us, but she fully taught us every day, Monday through Friday. We had a set schedule. Our schedule was a little different 'cause homeschool is different, but we learned the same things [as public school students]. Our books was different. They were Christian-based, so they was different. But we got up probably about the same time that public schools started. We got up the same time and got out the same time. Only difference was we didn't catch the bus. Other than that, we had the same schedule, we had recess, same thing. We had friends. Of course, they would get out later 'cause they had to ride the bus. And so, we met with them, we all played, no problem.

So, I grew up and I graduated from homeschool. I was 17 when I graduated. But before I graduated, I had got into [the technical school]. They admit students who is 17. I majored in cosmetology. I got in there when I was in my senior year in homeschool. I was on campus at the same time I was homeschooled. And so, I graduated from high school in May and then a few months later, I graduated from [the technical school]. I got my diploma in cosmetology.

All her life, Amber longed to attend the HBCU, Dabny State University, in her hometown. After graduating from the local technical school, a series of hardships beset Amber and her family. Finally finding a break in hardships, Amber was able to enroll at Dabny State at the age of 25 where she is now a junior healthcare management major and who, more than any other participant in this study, has embraced the campus culture and involved herself in some of the services, organizations, and extracurricular activities that the university has to offer. She continues to live at home with her parents.

Debbie

At 56, Debbie is the oldest of the six participants in this study and is an incredible story teller with a knack for detail. Debbie was actually the original inspiration behind my dissertation topic, and I was thrilled when she volunteered to participate. Always poised, Debbie purposefully and proudly exudes professionalism everywhere she goes. Debbie's life revolves around her immediate family, which includes a husband and four children. Her devotion to them is so strong that she delayed pursuing a career and her educational goals until she had raised her children and her husband had retired. Debbie's sincere appreciation for those who have helped her along the way is evident throughout her story, as is her pride in herself for all of her academic achievements.

I always say I was a menopause baby. I think my mother was like 32, somewhere like in there when I was born. My mother always kept me involved [in extracurricular activities]. I was a Girl Scout. I went all the way up to cadet. I'll never forget, I had a wonderful Girl Scout leader. It was like sixth grade and when we would go on our trips and stuff, I would ride with her and her husband. She had no kids, but everyone else would be on the bus. She always looked out for me. Ms. Landon always looked out for me. Then the most shocking thing was, I was volunteering at the nursing home when I first got back here, and I didn't know who she was. And someone told me, "That's Ms. Landon." She had Alzheimer's I guess. She was teaching; she was in like personal care, and she was talking to children all the time. And so, someone said, "Ms. Landon," and I was like, Ms. Landon? So, I looked at her and said, "That's Ms. Landon!" And it broke my heart, and I actually went and bought her a teddy bear, and I gave it to her, so she could just have something to hold. Ugh. That really broke my heart just to see because that's what she did! You know, she really, really, really looked after me. She really looked after me.

I had a bad experience when I was in school. For some reason, I don't know whether it was because I was the only child, but people always picked on me. All the time. I had an awful experience in elementary school. It was only when I got to middle and high school when things started to mellow out. But elementary school, I had a horrible time. My mother, at the time, worked a lot, so a lot of things she couldn't attend. I wish she had perhaps been more involved, you know, but she worked a lot.

[Did you go to school during integration?] [The school system] actually just started—were actually putting [integration] in action. You know, it had been in action

for a long time, but they actually started it. In 1976, they started moving us around—busing us to different schools. It was zoned for different areas, but the area I was living in, we stayed there. We had exactly five White people at my school at that time. They was there, probably not by choice, but because of economic reasoning because I can remember plainly people were pulling their kids out sending them to private schools. That's when I feel private schools came about because [White parents] refused to have [their children] go to school with us.

The tension, it was high. And at that time, *Roots* had come out. And [the White students] were in school and they would walk down the hall, and I don't know why, I thought it was so mean. They would get in an altercation with the [Black] kids or whatever and I can understand, I probably would've left too! The Black kids would start it, so I'd probably felt the same way. And that was I think around that time, that's when we started getting resource officers. They wasn't really called resource officers, but it was kinda like a resource officer to kinda keep things down. And that's when all the kids started leaving, and they just refused to go. Even to this day, [Jefferson] High School is predominantly Black and they have that Black pride in their school. They're the only school that is meshed where you cannot break that bond. And it was kinda like [Dabny State]. It's the bond, you know, they just refused to mesh, so.

I think education really changed a lot for Black children after integration. It was better when we were in neighborhood schools. When the school system started moving children out, putting them in other neighborhoods, I think that's when the education actually broke down. That's what started to actually break the education system down because when I was in elementary school, my school was across the street. My teachers

lived in our neighborhood. My assistant principal actually lived down the street from us. I lived in a nice area, we didn't live in the—I didn't live on that end [referring to the higher end housing], but there was an end where there were teachers. So, the teachers lived around you, they knew you! There was a better relationship with the teachers and the students and the parents. When they started, 'cause just think about it—you're taking kids from their comfort zone, you know, if someone's not home, you know what I'm saying? If they're not at home, you're moving them over here, so they're left to themselves. We didn't really have all these after school programs and all this kinda stuff because we had our neighbors that were there.

I didn't feel like I was really educated until I got to college. The most vivid memory that comes to my mind is very vivid to me. I'll never forget my sixth grade year. I had this teacher by the name of Ms. Allen. I will never forget her. Ever. She was a Black woman. A big Black woman! [Teachers] felt embarrassing you would help you [learn]. And again, and I think that's when math became a problem for me because when I got to her—I was doing good until I got to her. And I don't know what it was, I don't know if it was addition or it looked like it was long division or something, she would wait, like if she sent you to the board to do a problem and you didn't get it right, you just stood there, and she would just humiliate you in front of the class and just holler and scream and then the new class would come in, and you still standing at the board. And I'll never forget that. But then, I had teachers that were loving, and they were kind.

Back when I was in school, we had groups. They had like Group 1, 2, 3, and 4. I don't know what the group was about, but it was for I guess levels of what they thought you knew or whatever. But I was in Group 3. They wanted to move me up, but my

teacher was like, “No, we can’t really move her up because of her math.” I didn’t really wanna move up anyway because of my friends. And that’s how it was. Everybody that was in a certain group, they became close. We had a close bond. And but I don’t like that because you may not be good at math, but you may be good at science. Everybody’s not good at everything, so I didn’t think that method worked. I think it isolated kids like Group 4, majority of those kids never finished school. They dropped out. So, I guess I was average, I don’t know what that mean. I don’t know. I guess I was on the fence, you can go either way. So, I didn’t like that.

[*How would you describe your family’s socioeconomic status?*] Well to everybody around me, they thought we were well off. You never know you’re poor. You don’t know! Because I was the only child, I had things that probably other children didn’t have. I had a cousin that came to live with us or whatever, but he had brought a waterbed and back then, they was like in a box and they were on the floor. And it didn’t have a heater on it, so it was the most coldest thing. So, when kids would come over, they was like, “Wow!” And because I didn’t have anybody to share my things, I kept my things. You know, so they always thought I was—and maybe that’s why they didn’t like me—they always thought I was more well off than what I was. But we didn’t have—to a certain group—now to that Group 1 and Group 2, we was probably down here [gestures toward the floor]. But to the others, my group and the ones up under me, they thought I was, you know.

When I was 16, my oldest daughter was born. During that time, [teenage pregnancy] was not favorable. There were no programs in the schools like they have now to help you if you get behind on your work. You know, like they have a program where

you can come in and they will help you with your work, give you extra time. There was nothing like that. It was not favorable at all. You were ostracized, set apart. It felt bad, but it's like you're thinking about when you're at school, you don't have that time to socialize with your friends, you gotta do your work 'cause you know when you get home, you're a mother. With the mother that I had, all the responsibilities was left on me. My mother did not really start engaging in my daughter's life, like doing things and taking her places, until she was maybe about 4. She meant that. I'll never forget this—she even went to a yard sale and bought me a stroller, so I could take my baby to school. My grandmother lived here, the projects was here, and my school was above the projects, so it was like a straight line. Get up, take the baby to my grandmother's house, drop her off, unpack, go to school.

Her daddy, my boyfriend, lived down the street [laughs]! We lived in a cul-de-sac, so he lived maybe like three or four houses down from me. We didn't make it because he was so possessive, and I didn't wanna be that possessive because I realized I was still young. He was there in her life for a moment. I mean, he was active in her life until I was like, "No." 'Cause my aunt was afraid—she was like, "You don't have to get married to anybody just because you got a baby," 'cause he had given me a ring. And to her, she felt like that was binding me up, and she didn't like that. He was very possessive. He didn't want me to go be around my friends, and I was isolated. And I didn't like the way that made me feel so I told him I said, "Look, I'm not ready to be married. I don't wanna be with no one person. I wanna go and I wanna have fun." I was trying to still be a teenager at that time and that caused a lot of riff, but you know, sooner or later he vanished out because when my husband came in, he kinda got him out.

My daughter's very active in the family now that she's older because I kinda kept them connected. Like when we would come home in the summer sometimes—'cause I never left my children—I would let her go down there or whatever. But it was kinda difficult trying to raise, being married to another person, and then having somebody, 'cause you're in the middle. But somehow it worked out, because as she grew older—I'd say probably when she became like 18 to 19, she saw the different things that we could offer and the things that he offered. Like with my husband, he was more supportive, and he would even encourage, you know, do this, this, this. And on that side, it wasn't like that. Well, just get a job. Just get a job? That's not what she wanted. So, she realized that over here I can be something, or someone's gonna help me. And over here, just get a job and that's not what she wanted.

Let me go back to when I met my husband. He had just come over here from overseas. He was in the military and they would drop the marines off that did not have a high school diploma at the adult learning center where I worked, but I didn't know him at that time. But when I met him, we had this entrance exam when the people would come into the adult learning center. I wanted to see how smart he was, so I gave him the test. He made a perfect score on the test! That's how I knew he was a smart person. He's very smart. Most smartest man that I knew at that time. But before I graduated, I started dating him. I had a friend in my class whose boyfriend was a friend of his, and he wanted to meet somebody. And I was like, "I don't have time!" I got to finish school. But anyway, we end up meeting one another, and we started dating at that time. So, at the age of 20, I got married and shortly after, I had my second baby.

After I got married, we were living on base here in [southwest Georgia], and my husband was deployed overseas for a year, so I attempted to go back to school. I went into a nursing assistant's course at [the technical school]. I finished that course and I started working at a nursing home. When he came back, we got orders to go to North Carolina where we stayed for maybe about 4 or 5 years. I was working at nursing home there too. And then he had another deployment, so I came home that year. I got a job working at [the local hospital] as a patient care specialist.

Again, he was gone a year and when he came back, we went back to North Carolina, but this time I'm pregnant, so I had my third child, which is my son. I worked for a while, but my son was not adjusting to babysitters, so that was the longest period of time where I just stopped working. I stopped working to take care of my son. And almost 2 years later, I got pregnant again with my baby, my last child so I became a stay at home mom. Then we got stationed in Orlando, but my parents were getting older, so I wanted to come home to kinda help them out. So, I came home, and I started just volunteering in the schools because my children were in school, and I didn't really care for the [local] county school system.

So, I was in the [predominantly Black] elementary school just volunteering with the babies, and I came across a [national program created to alleviate poverty] within the schools, and I started working with the coordinator of that particular school. She was really impressed because I would work with the children and because I was Black, and she was White, she didn't feel like she could get over to the parents. She didn't know how, so I would help her. So, she introduced me to her boss because you could only be at [the program] for like 3 years and her years was ending. The director was very

impressed, so she offered me a job as a site coordinator at [the local] high school, so that's how I got into the school system. And as I began to work in the school system, I was able to be there for my children as well as help other people children.

Things didn't go well because the principal and I didn't get along. He found out I didn't have a degree, and he wanted someone else. He was a new incoming principal, and he wanted someone with a degree. That crushed me because the kids that was in that program I had brought with me. They was just saying they were challenged, they couldn't learn or whatever. So, I brought them over with me and so he actually wanted someone else to take that position. So needless to say, I decided to just go ahead and resign. And when I resigned, I actually went over to [another] high school, which the principal at that time asked me to come over there because he needed a parent facilitator. That's how I ended up at that high school.

Okay, well when my husband came back after he retired, he started school. He graduated college in Orlando and then after that he came here. So once my husband retired, he worked at the alternative school in a pilot program that they had started to help students and that encouraged him to go back and become a special education teacher. He went to [Dabny State], and he went through real fast. Then he went through the accelerated program and he got his master's degree, also at [Dabny State] and then he went on to do his 6-year program. He was a principal at [a local] middle school for 6 years, then they moved him over to [the high school] where I worked as a parent facilitator. So, we both worked up until 2013 and after the school system changes, he didn't finish that year out at [the local] high school. He asked to be moved, and he went over to [a different local] high school and that's where he finished his year up.

So, at this time I was doing a lot of social work in the high school as a parent facilitator, so I had said, “Well if I’m gonna do the work, then I should go back to school and educate myself so that I can do it right.” So that’s what inspired me to go back to school and become a social worker. I stayed, oh God, it was like starting all over again. I went to the labs, I went to the math lab. Math was not my thing. And at that time, we had to take the Regents test. I think I took that thing like three times. It was the writing part. And I struggled with that, but I just felt like I couldn’t give up. I had to go and finish ‘cause that’s just a thing. I don’t know if that’s my OCD kicking in, but whenever I start something, I have to finish! And that’s important to me—to finish whatever I start. So, I was taking night classes and that was taking me so long.

I was working during the day at [the local] high school. And at that time, they didn’t really allow you to take day classes, but my principal was very helpful. A couple of classes where I had to take them in the daytime, he would let me take them, and I would go back in the afternoon, and I would stay an hour or whatever that I missed until I finished. And then, like I said, when I was working at [the local] high school, I realized that I was doing a lot of social work, so I went on to take a course, the prerequisites for social work while I was there. And it was a challenge again, but again it was like I was in this corner and I had to come out, so I didn’t have a choice. All those classes I was running from, I had to finally take them—like economics. Didn’t wanna take that. Statistics. But surprisingly, I came out better than I thought I would and my teachers that I had, they were very supportive. They credited me for my work ethic and they all just felt like I would do very well and so I went on to apply for [Dabny State University] in social work.

Debbie recounted many wonderful experiences at the junior college before transferring to the HBCU where, despite some challenges, she graduated at the top of her class and was awarded with a scholarship for her achievements. After several months of trying to reenter the workforce in a professional position, Debbie eventually landed a position as a social work professional. Debbie updated me recently with the news that she left her position to pursue a graduate degree in social work.

Kayla

Kayla is a single, fiercely independent Black woman with a cherubic face and pleasant disposition who was born and raised in the Bible Belt. She currently works as a caregiver for a client with mental illness. She has returned to school after a long hiatus to earn the necessary credentials to advance her career in mental health. Kayla's story is one of fresh starts—leaving behind unhappy situations and old baggage to begin anew on her own.

I am 35 years old. I have a twin sister who looks just like me, then I have three other brothers and an older sister. My dad left my mom. He stepped out on my mom. He cheated and left her. They're back together. They divorced after a year and got remarried the next year. They've been together for 36 years. My mom had a child—like me, my sister, my brother, and my other brother are with my mom and dad together, but my other brother and my other sister, like my mama had a child and my daddy had a child when they met.

We were really poor. Well, I wouldn't say really poor, but my mama survived. My dad was in and out of the house. He had a good job, but he kinda did things in the streets that he wasn't supposed to do. He would gamble his money sometimes, or he

would buy drugs with his money, or he would give his money to those ladies that he was messing with and so sometimes, we didn't have everything we needed. We ate chicken every day—chicken and rice and some kind of vegetable every day. My mama stretched it as much as she could. They got back together, and as they got back together, life became better. We went from not being poor, but not having everything we needed, to when we started growing up and getting like 14, 15, 16 years old, we can get cars, we can go out to eat, we can have name brand clothes, name brand shoes. It got much better when we got older. My school was the haves and the have-nots. We all knew who have money, we knew who didn't have money, and we knew who was in between.

When I was in school, I was into everything. I was in practically everything—student council, all those clubs. I did all that stuff. I was in the band, color guard. The reason why I got in the band was because we could not go to football games. We couldn't do anything. Our whole life was church. I felt like if I got—the band you get to go to the football games, you get to go on trips and stuff like that, so my parents didn't know that. My family's very musically inclined, so my mama thought that we were trying to enhance our gifts, but we wasn't trying to enhance our gifts. We knew that that was our way out, so that's what we did. I joined the band. I played clarinet, and I was on the dance line. School was fun until I got into a relationship, then once I got into a relationship, it was just him and I, so school was more like that type of thing. I started dating him when I was in the ninth grade. He was just a year older than me. It was crazy 'cause he was even in my classes—every one of my classes. I think if you take dating out of it, school would have been fabulous. School got fun when he left. My senior year was wonderful. I got nominated for everything.

I graduated in 2000. What's crazy is that none of my family has been to college. My dad didn't graduate from school. He just had a lot of things going on within himself. Like, his reading level wasn't up to everybody else and people would pick on him and stuff like that. So, one day he just didn't—he never went back. My mom graduated from high school, but she stopped there. My siblings have no desire. My parents could care less if I went to college. My mom didn't care if I went to college, she didn't care. God—whatever God had. At any cost, whatever God had. We never talked about college—we never, nothing. Nuh uh. It was, “I'm just gonna get you to graduate from high school.”

I had a cousin who my mom—my mama adored her. She graduated a year before I did. She graduated in '99, I graduated in 2000. She was off at college. My mama was always like really, really close to her and no matter what we did—she didn't say, like “Y'all are in competition,” but I would watch my mama reaction when she would come home. She'd be like, “Oh my God!” and stuff like this and she just loved her more—not more, I won't say she loved her more, but she was just excited. She would call and tell her how college was and my mom would make her care packages and stuff like that. And I'm like, “Hello?” So, I felt like if I went to school, me and my mother would have that relationship because my mother, she didn't like my boyfriend, and she's the reason that we broke up. She would see the stuff that he would do to me, and she was like, “He can't come back to this house anymore, he can't call you anymore.” So, our relationship was kinda like bad after that, so I felt like if I went to college, we could try and mend what we had going on, but it didn't mend it.

I went to [a nearby university] in 2001. You know how when you graduated, “Oh, I wanna get away from my parents.” I wanted to stay in the area, but I didn't want

to go to [the local junior college], I wanted to get out from under my parents. If I went to [the local junior college], it was like right down the road and so I went to [a nearby university] because it wasn't too far, but it wasn't home. I moved in the dorms. I went and lived, but I never talked to them. They paid for it. They paid for it out of pocket. She paid some of it, and I paid some of it. She didn't care. It wasn't no support. You know how you go, and everybody's parents with them? I had no support. It was like here you go, drop you off. I wanted to go to school, but I had no support. It was hard without support. And I would see everybody family calling them, sending them care packages, coming in to see them. I got nothing.

I stayed there a semester. I just stopped going to [the nearby university] one day. I just quit going. I didn't tell them I was gonna quit going, I just stopped going. I had a boyfriend that I had had since 16, so what I was doing was trying to stay in the area to keep my relationship, but we broke up and so when we broke up, I stopped going to school. I waited until school was over that semester, then I left. When we broke up, school was not an option. I just didn't care. All I wanted to do was get away from him, so I moved to [a suburb of Atlanta], and I was just like, "Forget school, I'm just gonna start my life up here." I stayed there about a year, and I came home to visit around the summer, and I saw him. He was like, "You better get your tail home!" And when you're in love or whatever—and so I wind up coming back. I wind up coming back, then I tried to go to [the local junior college], but because I had left [the nearby university, the whole financial aid thing with [the local junior college], it just wasn't going right. They wanted my parents to sign a couple things, but I was no longer living with my parents, and they

were mad because I had left and that kind of thing like that, so I was just like, “Forget school, whatever.”

After this experience, Kayla opted to enter the workforce and has been working as a caregiver for a psychiatric client for over 10 years. After realizing that she had plateaued in her career, Kayla made the decision to reenter college in hopes of becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). Kayla is finishing up her first year at the HBCU in the social work program.

Shaquita

Shaquita is a tall 29-year-old woman with a head full of curly, natural hair that she wears in a “puff,” as she calls it atop her head. She is a matter-of-fact, tell-it-like-it-is woman who has a commanding presence in the room. Of all the women in this study, Shaquita is the most openly opinionated and frank. Unprompted, she often generously offered very personal details about her life to me—initially a stranger—for this study.

I’m 29, originally from South Carolina. I was the only girl in the family growing up. Being the only girl in the family, I’ve been brought up really, really tough, being around a lot of men. My mother and my father were high school sweethearts and married. Together, they had me and my little brother. My mom is one of those women who had both of her kids, and she was done. My dad was a drug addict, so he was addicted to crack, he snorted cocaine, and he shot up with needles, but he was the most handsome fellow that you would ever see. Like if you saw him, you would never expect it. A lot of my friends thought I had like the perfect family—the traditional family with my mom and dad. But it’s like, “No, little do you know my dad would leave for days at a time.” He was in the house with us up until my mom divorced him when I was probably

9 or 10 and then she remarried when I was 11. My stepdad is perfect. They've been married for 14 years now.

My brother is 5 years younger. I actually took care of him a lot because that's when my father started using drugs, so my mother was always a single mother after that point and even though she was married to him, he would still be popping in and out, so I took care of him a lot. It was funny because my little brother asked my mother, maybe a couple weeks ago, "Were you there when I was a baby?" because he didn't remember her because she worked so much. Whenever we would go to babysitters or our grandparents' house, it was me who was taking care of him and it offended her because it was like, "I was here, I was providing," but I was just his fun baby sitter.

I would go to my paternal grandparents' house on the weekends and then my maternal grandparents' house throughout the week because they live in the same area as us. The paternal ones lived 45 minutes away. My maternal grandparents were perfect. My paternal grandparents were not. First of all, my maternal grandfather owned a lot of land . . . like, acres and acres of land. We had a trampoline, we had a swimming pool, we had a basketball court, and we had a farm. We had so much stuff over there until going to grandma's house was like a field trip. We would go play, and they fed us everything we wanted—ice cream, cookies, whatever you want, there's no limits. But with my paternal grandparents, being that I was the only girl in the family, I wasn't allowed to go outside of the gate. I wasn't allowed to talk to people. I wasn't allowed to be outside. I wasn't allowed to talk to any of the neighborhood kids. It was crazy.

[Tell me about your early schooling experiences.] With my mother and my father, I was public schooled. My public school was mostly Black, I believe not because

of the neighborhood. We lived in a nice neighborhood. We had a swimming pool in our backyard—the whole in-ground. Okay, honestly, I believe that it was predominantly Black because the White people didn't want the White kids with us or whatever. They put 'em in the Christian academies around the area, but what were y'all learning? Nothing. They got homeschooled too.

[When I got older,] I got homeschooled. My brother chose public school. I chose homeschool because I just got sick and tired of—what happened was, it was this guy named Jared and Jared said something sexually inappropriate to me. It pissed me off because I got in trouble for responding back inappropriately. I got in trouble! I was like, “How is it you can say what you want to say to me, but I can't say what I want to say back?” And I was like, “You know, this is some bull.” So, I went to my stepdad and that's my guy. Like, my stepdad, that is my guy. So, I was like, “Dad, you know, I really, really, really, really do not want to go to public school.” He was like, “Why not?” And I was like, “Because they're just full of it.” And he's like, “Oh?” And I'm like, “Yeah, Dad. This dude said whatever he said,” and then he started looking up things. He started with private school, then he was gonna put me in an academy, and I was like, “Dad, I don't wanna be with students. I wanna be with myself.” Then he looked up homeschool and he was my teacher.

When I was in public school in elementary, I was really good, an overachiever. I was really competitive. I got an 87 one time. I flipped my lid. I was like, “I don't want this! What is this? This is a B!” That was me. Middle school, I started smelling myself [gaining confidence in herself]. I was really just kind of trying to come into my own. I thought I was cute until getting here. That's when I realized that my light skin does not

mean shit. But then, when I was younger, I felt like because I was a red bone [referring to her light skin] and my booty's big—I was just really about my physical appearance, and I was all into myself when I was young.

And then, when I got in ninth grade, I was really smelling myself and I started telling the teachers how to teach. And this is when I really started realizing that I couldn't be a regular student. I had to be in my own little area because when the teachers didn't move fast enough for me—I caught on quick—I would get in trouble because I would start talking. I would leave class and just go do something to keep me entertained. I started telling teachers they couldn't read right because the one thing that you can't do when you're in a classroom with students is read in a monotone voice. First of all, we don't wanna be read to. So, my teacher, Ms. Belding, that would read like that, I'd be like, "You know what, I got you." I was just always this headstrong, "I got this" type of student. And then, I would say when I dropped out and went to homeschool, the curriculum for homeschool was so much harder than what I've ever seen for public school. I was like, "What is this? I don't know what I'm doing." Then I became discouraged. Then I thought I was dumb, and it took everything in me to just keep pushing from tenth grade to twelfth grade. [*Did you finish?*] Yeah. I'm no quitter.

Let's see, what else? Oh, I have a girlfriend [long pause]. We've been together 9 years. I wish she was here 'cause we love telling the full story of how we met together. Usually I take over. We literally met two houses down from my paternal grandparents' house. The person that stayed in the middle of us, Angel, is her friend and my friend, but she and I never knew each other. So, the story is, I knew her entire family. I would take my report card to her grandfather, never knew her. One day I went to visit my

grandparents and we were pulling in this gate—this forbidden gate that I couldn't step outside of and I was closing the gate and Angel was like, "What's up, Quita?" and [my girlfriend] was with her. I never dated a girl before her, but her hair—her puff was like, "Whoa! Oh my God!" Her hair—and when she pulls it, it comes out like—Oh my god, it's beautiful. So, she had this big puffy hair and I'm like, "Who is that?" So, I asked her, "Do you get perms?" She was like "No, never." But I'm like "Whoa!"

I met her start of tenth grade. We went to a predominantly White [private university] together. My uncle went there. He was on the basketball team, so he was like the big dude on campus. I felt it was safe, and it was my first time. I was always used to being with them. I loved it when I was there. It has a really good family feel that I loved. As a Black woman going to a PWI—it was Christian-based, so they tried to have this whole, "We're all inclusive, we love everybody," type of mentality, but then there was still—I never encountered downright racism. Never. I never heard just like racial slurs 'cause it was really like a family. We used to sit at the table with a lot of White people, and we would have White people in the rooms, and we would go to all the White events and they would come to whatever we had. It was almost like they understood the give and take of it. Like, "Okay, it's something from y'all that we need, and we need y'all to meet the color quota, so we'll accept you and accept what it is that you have to give us."

Now, as a lesbian going to the Christian school, that was the part that—it was never my Blackness that made me feel uncomfortable, but it was always how they responded to if they saw us holding hands—the looks. I don't think anybody was ever brave enough to ever say anything because it was always that whole angry Black woman type thing. But they'd look, and they would try to hide, shy away from it, and I'm just

like—the only moments that it bothered me was the moments that it happened because I would always say, “What do you do that we don’t know about, that I could frown upon?” And it just was, it was uncomfortable. To eat, it would be uncomfortable because we know they’re eating and snickering and looking. Like, “Did you not see that I saw you? ‘Cause you can see me and I can clearly see you.”

Shaquita eventually stopped out of college because of a disagreement with her family. When they found out she was living in a lesbian relationship, they forced her to come home. Eventually, this led to her decision to move away from her family and reenter college in Southwest Georgia where she could live more openly. After attending the local junior college for a short period of time, Shaquita made the decision to attend the HBCU where she recently graduated with a degree in English.

Shontae

Shontae is a 37-year-old divorced mother of three teenage children who she puts above everything else in her life. The daughter of hardworking, blue-collar parents, her father’s addiction to alcohol served as a backdrop for Shontae’s otherwise normal and happy childhood. Growing up with an alcoholic father became the inspiration behind her choice of major during her reentry experience. After listening to and then analyzing her stories, I realized Shontae is a gifted storyteller as her stories take the audience through an obvious beginning, climax, and resolution.

I am originally from [a small town in a neighboring county]. I am an only child. My parents—kinda crazy, they met, had me, separated, then got married. I have my mama’s maiden name, but my parents are married. They’re still married. My mom, she works in the factory. She’s worked in the factory for about 25 years. She’s so dedicated.

She's so punctual. She's always there. She's always on time. She takes her job very seriously. She graduated high school. She started college, and she got pregnant with me when she was 18 or 19, then she had me and she stopped.

My dad, he's a veteran. He served in the Vietnam War. He is one of eight kids. His mom died when he was in middle school. He dropped out of high school, joined the military, and at 17 went from boot camp to maybe 6 months later, he went to Vietnam. I have a picture of him on my mirror, and he's just so young, and he looks so fragile to be 17-18 going off to war. He joined because he said it was so many of them that he just didn't want to add any additional burden onto my grandpa. Once he got out of the military, he went to college. He has a degree in psychology. But from what I think, with everything that happened in his life, he was going downhill just from not processing things that actually happened. So, he has not used his degree, not one day in his life. He's never worked in the field. He's a carpenter. He said he wanted to be a carpenter because Jesus was a carpenter. That's crazy. He's interesting. He's a real interesting person.

My dad, he is a recovering alcoholic. He said he started drinking when he was about 14 and with him going into the military, he just kinda kept following along with it. He's a talker, so when he was drunk, he would just talk even more. He wasn't volatile or anything like that. Me and him, we did more things than me and my mom. We would go to baseball games or we would do puzzles or play cards. It was mostly me and him because my mom always had a 9-5 job, whereas his job was so flexible, I could go to work with him and just sit on top of the roof while he did it. So, me and him, we did more things than me and my mom. They would fuss; they would argue, partially because

he was an alcoholic, but also because my mom has a very strong personality. She'll run over you if you let her. But my mama never drunk anything. She don't drink at all. Just kinda naturally crazy. But he's been sober for about 12 years now. I asked him what happened, and he was saying that if would've kept going down the path he was going down he wouldn't have been able to watch his grandkids grow up. He just quit cold turkey.

Anyway, I lived in [the small town in a neighboring county] up until maybe third grade and then I moved here. When we moved over here we didn't have a vehicle. Everything that my dad had worked for at that point, he kinda gave to the ex-wife in the divorce. We didn't have a lot, but I had more than a lot of other people. We were never hungry. We always had food. We had family here. My grandpa would take us places, or we would just ride the bus up until about 5 years of us living here, and we eventually got a vehicle. So, we were kinda poor. But he always worked, and my mom always worked. They had low income jobs, and he spent it on alcohol, but they worked.

I don't remember my parents being involved at school, well as a matter of fact, they weren't really involved in stuff. I had to maintain good grades, and I couldn't misbehave or nothing like that. I made some Cs, but it was like I made enough for them not to be upset. If I felt a little shaky, I had to get right because I didn't want to get in trouble, but like PTOs, they never—I don't ever remember my mama being at anything after school or nothing like that. I think it was more so because she worked, but she just really didn't feel like it was important, I don't know. But they did want me to make decent grades. They expected me to graduate. They wanted me to go to school. They wanted me to go to [the local junior college] or somewhere that was close.

Shontae graduated from high school and got pregnant immediately afterwards. She married her high school sweetheart and their family grew from one child to three within just a few years' time. Shontae started school at the nearby junior college, but eventually stopped going to school to care for her three young children. Shontae and her husband were married for over 10 years before separating. Shontae and her husband's separation eventually formalized into a bitter divorce, which started a chain of events that ultimately led Shontae to leave her job in retail to become a full-time student while caring for her three children. Shontae recently graduated from the university and is now working as a professional in the field of social work.

Zoe

Zoe, 30 years old and incredibly soft-spoken, is the most guarded of all the women in my study, and for good reason. Her childhood was beset by traumatic episodes of parental abuse and familial separation. Her responses were short, and she often cited a bad memory for her forgetfulness, though it would be entirely understandable if she had suppressed all the painfully sad, and often surreal, memories from her childhood.

I was born in [a small town in Southwest Georgia], but I moved away when I was 1-year-old. I moved to Florida. I went into foster care, and I was in many foster homes. My mom, she's from Florida. From my understanding, she was trying to run, but ended up getting caught, and they just placed us there in Florida. They place you wherever you can go because we didn't have family to go to at that time, so they just placed us in the foster home. We didn't know these people. It was just somewhere to go.

My mother was 29 when she had me. She told me I was a mistake when she had me. I've been away from her so long that we don't have that mother-daughter—I don't

look at her as a mother. I know my father—well, they say he's my father, but I don't really know until a blood test because he wasn't really around when I was younger. I had asked him one time, but he was like he didn't know for sure.

I have six siblings. I'm the baby of the family. I'm the youngest of the six. We all have the same mother, but different fathers. We all ended up in foster care. We were all separated, but somehow, my youngest brother and myself, we reunited and that's when we ended up living together in the foster home. We met in the foster home. They introduced us like, "This is your brother." I was young. Ever since then we been placed together. Altogether, I was in foster care from one until seven and a half, and then I got back in when I was 15. I moved back to Georgia when I was seven and a half. Then I was with my mom and at 15, I went back into foster care.

Living with my mom for those 8 years was awful. It was just me and my brother. The others didn't want to come back. My caseworker asked me if I wanna come back to live with my mother and I did, but I regretted it. We got taken away when I was 15 because my mom tried to kill me with a butcher knife. She threatened to kill me with a butcher knife. And she had hit me in the face, kinda like a punch in the face, and she had threatened to kill me with a butcher knife and my brother told the school.

[*What provoked that?*] She's always been angry, but it was all about clothes. She wanted me to iron all the kids' clothes. I had to take on the mother role when she wasn't there. She was out and about. She liked to club, and she liked to go out with her men, and she would work as well. She just wasn't home, and so I had to fulfill those duties. I think it was just that one particular moment; I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it! She wanted me to iron all their clothes. I just was tired. It was just like ever since I

moved with her, I had to fulfill those duties. She expected that out of me and then I was already dealing with issues—foster care period—and I never dealt with those issues. I just kept going.

[*How was foster care compared to being with your mother?*] They mistreated us too in foster care. They would beat on us. They would beat on us! Then, we were always in one room. We just couldn't do anything. We couldn't do anything! I was in a lot of different foster homes. That's how it works. You get moved a lot. I don't remember how many. I just remember every time I opened my eyes, I was in a different place. I do remember that. From my memory, I remember being in different schools. I don't remember a whole lot. I just remember change. Nothing was ever the same. I just remember waking up, and I was in a different place every time and then I was around people that I didn't know. It was other kids that was in foster care, we were just housed in one room with all these different kids.

I didn't have any friends when I was younger. The situation I was in didn't allow me to. I couldn't stay after school, couldn't spend the night, couldn't do anything as a child. I mean I wanted to, but it just didn't happen that way. I couldn't do stuff with them, so it was just like, "I don't wanna be around you. You can't do anything." Like, "I want you to spend the night." I can't spend the night. So, it's like, what can I do? I can't do anything. Couldn't even stay after school and do like a little program. I couldn't do anything. I didn't have a childhood. And I was always moving.

I wanted a new family because I got tired of moving [long pause], but it just didn't happen that way. I was never adopted because the plan was always for reunification, but she didn't do her part. There's things that you have to do before you

can get your child back if they're placed into foster care like parenting classes, coming to visit your child—they look at all that stuff. She could've been got us, but she didn't do her part. They took us to begin with when I was younger because of physical abuse on my siblings and one time, I heard that she had hit my brother with a belt buckle that looked so bad that it looked like somebody fried eggs on him—on his face.

[*Describe your early schooling experiences.*] I just remember being in school all the time and I remember suffering academically because I didn't have anyone to help me. I struggled. I don't ever remember my foster parents going to the school. I just remember being in the house the whole time. I don't even think they were into our school like that—like into our academics and stuff. I don't even think they were into it. Behavior-wise, when I was younger, I wasn't bad. I was more, I don't know, to myself. I just didn't feel like the rest of the kids. Kids, they focused on being a child. I focused on surviving, making sure the younger ones were okay, just trying to stay out of my mother's way and just—physical abuse was all around me.

I was bad when I was probably like 15 on up. That was like my terrible years—disruptive, getting into a lot of arguments, fighting with other students. When you're in foster care, when you're in a group home setting, like with other children, they like to pick on you and stuff. And then, you don't have the finest clothing because your clothing come from the state, so whatever you get from the state at that particular time, that's all the money you have to work with. And so, there were times when we would have to share clothing amongst the girls that's in the group home. We just didn't have a whole lot, and I just remember this one girl, she was like, "That's why you're in a group home." She was just making fun of us, like we didn't have parents, we had no dad. I remember

one boy, he was like, “That’s why you ain’t got no daddy.” I just remember being angry when I was 15. Oh, I was terrible. I was angry at everyone—the whole situation. I was angry at my family because nobody didn’t want to take me in. I was angry at my mom because of how she put me in this situation. And then, I felt like people I was living with at the group home didn’t care. So, it was like I was just living—existing, pretty much.

I went to high school here, but I was expelled for skipping. I didn’t want to go to class. They expelled me, and they told the people. At that time, I was living in a group home here. It’s a temporary shelter. They’ll house you for—it’s supposed to be 3 months, but I stayed there like 5 months because they couldn’t find a placement for me. Anyway, if you get caught, or if the staff says that you been skipping, you’re supposed to stay in your room. You get disciplined, I guess. You can’t do any activities, like when they go out on the weekends and do the skating. That was a big thing back then. I couldn’t do any activities. I didn’t care. I didn’t care! I think around the time that I got suspended, it was close to the summertime, so it got closer to when school let out. I stayed there. I turned 16. After there, I went to a foster home in Americus and then I went to another foster home.

Turning 16 sticks out the most to me because that was the time you was supposed to be around family and they supposed to celebrate you turning 16. You supposed to do stuff, and I was stuck in a group home. I couldn’t do anything because at that time I was living in a shelter and the other girls had stole some hygiene products from a closet. I was dumb. They put it in the trunk in our room and they were like, “You hold one thing,” not thinking if I do this, I’ll be involved. I didn’t have anything to do with that because I wasn’t even there when they stole it. But because I had one item, I was

punished with them, and that was my birthday. As far as celebrating, I went to the Dollar Tree and bought some makeup. They gave me \$10, and that was my birthday. That was probably the hardest. There's no cake.

I was depressed. Everybody was depressed. When I was in foster care, in the group home setting, they prescribed me medicine like Zoloft, but I didn't take it enough for it to have an effect on me. Well, I would take it, but I would spit it out in a plant pot or something. I felt like they didn't care about me. They just wanted to medicate—they medicate all the girls that's in the homes. Suicide was something I wanted to do, but it never worked for me [laughs]. Never worked. I took a bottle of pills, and it didn't work so I was just like, "Nah, I'm gonna stop" [laughs]. I was depressed. If I got upset, I had to deal with it myself, and I think that was the reason why I was shutting down because I was dealing with so much. I was mad because I felt like they didn't understand me because I was 16 and had a lot of issues, and they didn't want to address that, but it was like the only way they deal with your issues is medicating you and admitting you.

[*Admitting you?*] I went to a mental facility—a mental hospital. I was 16. They admitted me, and I was there for maybe like a week, but it felt like a month. They had put me there because I just stopped talking to them, and I wasn't interacting with them and I think I might have said something to the effect of having suicidal thoughts. I don't know. I was 16. I stayed there about a week. It was a bad experience! It did feel like a mental health facility! And then it's like they house you—it's the process, it's horrible! And I didn't even know children were there. So, it was like you see other children and it's like a cold place. They have therapy there. It was for kids. It was for kids!

It was a time where when we had to sit in the common area. We just had to watch TV. We just had to sit there [laughs]! And I remember it was this other girl, she was kinda like me. We were normal. We were depressed, but we were teenagers. She was like the only other normal person in there [laughs]! Like, we would have education, we had to go to school—had to go to school [laughs]! Then they would tell us when to eat. We all had to go in and eat. We had to wear certain outfits. Then there were times when we had therapy. Then we had to come back into the common area and wait until it was time for us to take our showers. Then when it was time to take our showers, we would all have to go into the shower room and then we would take our showers. Then we would come back into the common area, then we would go to bed. Then we'd all have to go to bed. The doors would open.

Zoe was released from the mental facility after a short time and continued living in foster care until she aged out at 18 years old. Still, the system supported her as she transitioned into adulthood and independent living. During this transition, Zoe received some training from a local technical college to become a medical assistant and Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) and attempted to continue her education at a local junior college but stopped out because she could not focus on school as she dealt with the emotional pain from her childhood. After working in the medical field for several years, Zoe eventually reentered school at the local junior college before transferring to the HBCU where she recently earned her bachelor's degree. She graduated cum laude and is now working as a child protection services investigator.

Experiences that Delayed Participants' Traditional Matriculation into College

To be sure, the literature includes studies that examine the experiences that delay college entry for Black women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013). Like this other research on Black reentry women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013), the study presented here uncovered similar themes around delayed college entry, including the hardships the women endured prior to reentry into college, barriers they faced to reentry into college, and the marginalization they faced in society as double minorities.

As their life histories demonstrate, the women in this study led varied and unique lives leading up to the point at which they matriculated into college as a reentry student. As I was analyzing the data, I found that the experiences they described that had caused their delayed entry into college developed into two major categories—hardships and marginalization/barriers to reentry, which had also been previously identified in literature on Black reentry women (Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013). I combined marginalization and barriers to reentry because the barriers to reentry that the women in my study faced often seemed to be a result of the marginalized position Black women hold in American society.

Hardships

As the women relayed their life histories to me in our first interview, Amber, Zoe, and Shontae recalled various events in their lives that had prevented them from entering college as a traditional student. I categorized these events as “hardships,” borrowing from the literature (Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013) and from Amber, who often referred to her troubling life experiences using that term.

Amber

Amber tells a heart-wrenching story of how her family survived poverty, homelessness, and chronic illness—“hardships” as she calls them—and how these experiences delayed her matriculation at her dream HBCU, but led her to become the empathetic, appreciative, resilient, and hard-working university student she is today. Some of the same hardships that kept her from starting college continued as roadblocks throughout her matriculation. Initially, Amber wanted to start the university after graduating from the technical college but delayed her entry until she saw a break in the hardships she and her family had been suffering. Amber relays her stories in vivid detail, bringing her story to life for the reader.

It’s always been, even when I was at [the technical school], it’s always been my dream to come to [Dabny State]. Me and my sister grew up at [Dabny State]. My mother and father took us to homecoming about ever since I was little. They brought us up around all this. They had cousins that went to [Dabny State] and other family friends went to [Dabny State], and we just grew up here. Every year, we went to homecoming, the parade, and to the football games so I’ve always had the atmosphere of it. It’s always welcoming and everything. I knew it was a athletic school, but ain’t know coming up, like they told us, “Okay, it’s a HBCU,” and so I learned about the history. That’s great! So, when I graduated [from the technical college], I said, “I want to go to [Dabny State].”

But I ran into hardships and everything, so I was like, “Okay, I’ll just put it off.” I said, “I’ll put it off and I’ll go ahead and just try and find a job.” I said, “I’ll give myself time and if I don’t find a job in a year, I’m going back to school.” So, I worked with my dad ‘cause he have his own business. He do painting and contracting. He been having

his own business for over 20 years. Then I got a job working at a call center, but that was a hard job. It was my first job outside of the family, 'cause I worked with my dad ever since 5 years old.

The pay rate was good and everything and I liked to tell myself, I can do it, you know, this call center thing. The job would've been okay, but it's the supervisors. It wasn't even that they was just strict. I would say borderline evil. It was that bad. I mean, this was a good job, they just made it so horrible. You'd come in late, you'd get fired. It was like they didn't care if it was, if you had a wreck, they didn't care if you get injured. Come to work whether there was a hurricane or a tornado, so they made it really bad. I mean, this was a good job, they just made it so horrible.

My parents raised me to work hard at what you do. When you get a job, work hard at it. But also, don't let nobody treat you like crap. No matter what job you get, make sure it's a good job, but make sure folks respect you. Remember your dignity. There's a difference between being firm, folks being firm and strict, and folks being just completely outrageous. One thing about my parents, they care. So, I said, "I'll let that go," and they said, "Okay, that's fine!" because they noticed that it was stressful. It was really stressful. I didn't tell them I was stressed, but they noticed that I was. So, after I quit there, I started with my dad again. So, I said, "Well I'll just get back in school," so I went back to [the technical school].

When I was going to [the technical school], I had a little bit of a rough time as well. The first time I had a rough time, hardships. We moved about once or twice. Second time I went, it was about the same thing, had a rough time. The first time we moved we were okay. First time we moved it was during the Christmas break, 'cross

town. Second time we moved, it was not during break. It was actually during when I was in school. And so, we had to move and this time we was in a hotel. And so that was stressful 'cause trying to study, and you got folks living above you, one side, and the other side. We was renting a house, and we had a hard time, like with money. My father, he had a hard time. My mother had a hard time. And so, on top of that, he had got sick. He ain't know what was wrong with him. Sometimes he couldn't work and so I'm trying to find a job, but I couldn't find a job. It was really hard.

[*Did your grades suffer?*] I made sure they didn't. At one point they did, but I made sure they didn't. I made sure I didn't get anything below a B, and I didn't. So, I got mostly As. It was stressful and everything, and especially like during the summer months, it's like it got harder. It was hot, and we had car trouble. And it was like, this was both times. First time it was [at the technical school] and the second time.

We share a car. At one point we had two cars, but then the other one just went down and then we had one car, and then that one went down and then we was borrowing a truck from a friend. He said we could borrow it and then he said, "It's fine you can keep borrowing it." And then his daughter came over and got it. So of course, we couldn't do anything about it. My father would drop us off. At times, we didn't have no gas money. So, it was no gas in the car, and we had to call a friend to come carry me to school. No matter what, I always had a way to school. That was a blessing. I didn't miss a day.

And so, we moved in the hotel. I had a friend who was really good. For the whole summer quarter, he would pick me up and carry me to school. And so, I was grateful of that. He was going to the same school, so he would tell me ahead of time if he

wouldn't be able to make it the next day and this and that. So, he was a really good friend. That really helped me out. And so, whenever I got a little money, I always had gas money for him. If I didn't, he understood. And I said, "When I come up, I'm gonna make sure I don't forget you." And he said, "That's fine! That's okay!" so I didn't forget him. I handed him something for that.

We was [in the hotel] 3 months. It was alright. We would go to sleep, and of course you got one person snoring [laughs]. Other than that, it was alright. Only stressful part, like I said, other people was loud, and the people at the front desk had to tell them be quiet. Whenever I had to study, I had to be at the school late because that's the only way I can concentrate and everything, where I know somebody'll say "Shhh!" [laughs], and versus the front desk, where when they close, you can't call up there. And they close at a certain time, so when they go home, and you got folks hardheaded and everything, you can't just go outside and say, "Hey, be quiet," this and that. You got rowdy people and everything. You don't want to cause a scene. You want to punch them in the face, but you don't want to, you know, you're already having a hard time. And so, but a few times, I'd go out there and tell them to "Shhh." They would be quiet, but then they'd start back up again.

But as far as us living together, it was fine. I always stay at home. We ain't no dysfunctional family. We all got along, kinda. It was no problems. It was a kitchenette, like full stove, full refrigerator, and you have a microwave and a sink and everything, so. And it wasn't no two-eye stove, it was a full stove, so that helped out a whole lot. So, we stayed in there a few months. And then it started to get better because my dad got a good contract. He got a house to paint, and it was a big house to paint and everything, and that

helped us out. That caused things to get better 'cause I was in school and getting financial aid and had extra money from Pell, so that helped.

I had Pell, and I had no loans. I was gonna get a loan, but thank God my financial aid advisor told me, "No!" She said, "Hold off 'cause if you go to [Dabny State], that's when you probably most really need it." I said, "Okay." She said, "I know you probably looking now like, 'Oh, I need that.'" She said, "No, don't do that." She said, "'Cause I don't want you to have any problems here with the loan and not—then you get over there and they won't—and you need them." So, I said, "Okay," and that helped out a lot. And so, it got better. I started hanging out with my friends, we went out and did things and stuff, we went out to eat or whenever we had a birthday, we had a little party and went out. But I had fun my last quarter because things were getting better and everything.

Shortly after when [my father] finished [the contract], that's when we moved back where we used to stay, and we had another hardship—had trouble with a neighbor. And they was like the neighbor from hell. And so, he would park on our area and when we moved back to where we used to stay at, of course, the lights was off. I think when we moved there we had a little bit of money, but not enough to cut the lights on, just to get food and stuff. Hopefully we could get another job. I didn't have a job, none of us had a job. My dad, he was working. My mother worked with him, so they worked together. Whatever job he had—painting, carpentry, whatnot—she worked with him.

So, we all was like looking for work, but it wouldn't come up. And so, we moved back there, so a few weeks later, January hit. January came around, and it got real rough 'cause the money ran out. The few little hundred dollars we had left ran out. And so, when no work would come up—well, we had some work, but it was small. Old folks

didn't want to pay and that's the problem you have when you in the service business— with folks that don't wanna pay you, you run into stuff like that. It's difficult when folks wanna get something for nothing. And so, he had run into that, but then come up to a point where—this is January—and in the house, there's no electricity. Only thing that's running is the water. And so now it's January, it's the dead of winter. It's gotten really, really cold. And so, what we did was we had a fireplace, thank God. We was in a mobile home, and we had a fireplace. So, whatever we bought, if we bought meat or anything, we cooked it over the fire.

So, we was in the cold about 3 months and it was really cold. At times, it was 10 degrees. And so, this was a mobile home. The food, well we would put it in one of those rooms. It was just that cold. So, we had—like, I had a cup of milk, and I put it on one of the little tables in there 'cause I didn't have much of a room. I just had my clothes, my bed, and a little table, probably a box or two over there. And so, in the morning time it would be freezing cold, so everybody would go to the living room 'cause that's where the fireplace was at 'cause the heat didn't go as far. Even when you had the door open, the heat would probably go up to my bed a little bit. Everybody went to the living room in the daytime. And good thing the sun would come through the front window. It was like three windows together, so it was like a big window. But the other rooms was freezing cold so we just kept the milk in there. But we stopped buying milk 'cause of course some days it would warm up, you couldn't buy anything. We didn't have no electricity in there so whatever we bought, we had to eat it up. That is, if we had anything to buy with.

[*Did your family receive any assistance?*] No, we didn't want none of that. We couldn't do it anyway 'cause we didn't qualify for it. You have to be, have some type of,

I don't know, probably have to have some type of standards. We were grown people, so. And we didn't want to get into that. That's another thing. Just didn't want to get on the system. Wasn't about to do that. So, we went through that, it was freezing cold. Three months. Plus, we had to go through other things, I have to go through as a female. It was cold. And so, my dad had gotten sicker again, and he didn't know what was wrong with him. He didn't. He had gotten a rash. And we was trying to tell him to slow down. Slow him down.

And we was weak, 'cause a lot of time we were hungry. And a lot of days you didn't have anything. And so, none of us had money and food ran out. And all we had was water to drink. And you had a few taco shells that we broke pieces of and we ate it. We shared it together. And we had ketchup packages that we ate. And we had probably a little bit of peanut butter that we spread on top of the taco shells, and we ate it. And we drank water and go to bed. And so, the next day we woke up okay, so we went to the cabinet to see if we had anything in there and we found like a little bar, but it was like baker's chocolate. And so, we broke pieces of that, even though it taste different 'cause it was baker's chocolate. And we ate that, and we shared that, and we drank water, and we went to bed.

Of course, the water was on, but then it was already cut off. But it was a way that it was still on. But we couldn't like flush it, so we would have to go—they had a truck, but it was like, it burnt gas. Like just go a few miles and then come back. So, it was like, ugh. And so, what we would do whenever we would go out, go find some water somewhere, a hose so we can fill, we filled up a lot of jugs and canisters and everything else to have enough to pour down in the toilet whenever we use the bathroom to flush it.

And you had to had enough, 'cause had to get a lot 'cause you had that to flush, and you have some for when you need a drink, and you gotta have some to warm up when you need to take a bath. That's what we had to do 'cause of course the shower wasn't running 'cause it didn't turn on like you want to, then the shower would run, but expect cold water running through there.

[*How did you heat the water?*] Through the fireplace. Put the water in the pot and we put it on the—we had a rack—so we put it on top of that for a little bit then brought it out and poured the water in another canister. Everybody had they different canister. And so, I would bathe, I would pour a little water on me, like douse myself and bathe myself and rinse myself off. I had to do it the old-fashioned way.

We had a family friend though, they would give away food. But they could only do like—they kept a record of only like once a month for each family and so they would come by and bring stuff and so that helped. And so, we had some cake mixes and some other things. And so, but we didn't have a stove, and so I say, "We can't bake these cakes." I went to my friend's house and baked the cakes. And I didn't tell him what we was going through 'cause we went through a lot of stuff with a lot of people, 'cause like I say when you're down, you find out who your real friends are when you're down. But I knew he was a good friend and he'd never look down on me. And so, I just said, "I need to use your stove to cook something and he said, "Okay, that's fine." And so, we cooked something, but he never asked, but that's the type of friend he is. He never asked, "Okay, why you need to use my stove?" He didn't do that. So shortly after, I told him what we was going through and everything.

But he was really busy, like he worked, he was going to [Dabny State], but I wasn't going here, so he could only do what he could. But he would work the early morning shift, like going in at 12 am and get off at 4 am, so I had to catch him whenever I could. But he knew what we was going through, and he really helped me out. Not one time did he look down on me. He was one I would think would, but he never looked down on me. He never asked, "Why you in that situation?" He didn't. At times my hair was messed up and he didn't look at me funny. He was a genuine friend. So, it was like him and a few others. And when I hit rock bottom, they was there. They didn't question anything, they didn't look at me, they didn't put me off and this and that. They didn't do that. And so that got with me. The fact, you know, you hold good friends close, so they was very few like him. I could count on my fingers a few others.

And so, some months passed and then it was like end of February, that last day of February, that's when we got into an altercation with the neighbor. The neighbor, he had a loud vehicle, he kept parking on our area, near my window. I couldn't sleep. I had to get up in the morning and I was like, "I can't sleep." It was already cold, and you can barely sleep in the cold. And so, when I got up, we would get up in the morning tired and so we went outside and there was an altercation. We just got tired of him. And so, my dad put up barricades and the neighbor's son went in, him and his friends, took the barricades. It was bricks, big old blocks. Both of them got arrested. My father was in jail for a few days and the charges got dropped. And so, when my dad went in jail that night, it was really hard. It was the first time all of us was really apart from each other and couldn't do nothing about it.

Probably about 2 weeks prior to that, I had a friend come by. Hadn't seen him in years. When I was young, we went to the basketball center together. He came up and checked on us, and he helped us out if we need anything 'cause my dad told him if they need anything, he said they be there at the house, he said it wasn't a hotel, they at the house now and everything. He said, "Go by and check on them, see if they need anything." He said, "I don't know what they doing. Do they need some food?" Of course. We live in a trailer park. It was woods all around, so we just went and pulled wood all the while we was staying there. Pulled wood and burned wood and everything. So, he helped us out and things got a little better 'cause family members came around and they helped us get our lights back on, and from that point on, my dad got some more work. Things started looking better. That's when I started working back for my dad again. I just kept working with my dad and that helped out a whole lot. He was paying me, so he got work again. Good work for houses and carpentry and painting and everything.

Things came up better for us again, then he got sick. He started getting sick off and on. We never knew what was wrong with him. That's when I got a job working at KFC, so this my second job working outside of family, and so I was happy to do that. I was a team member, a cashier. So, I started working there and then, I was like, "Okay I'm gonna go ahead and go to [the HBCU] now." I couldn't go there the other years. Of course, going to school takes money and I didn't want to drop out. No one wants to be a known as a college dropout. So, I said, "I can go now!" and so I applied way early.

Amber has been in poverty, homeless, without a vehicle, unemployed and underemployed, and caring for a sick father, all of which contributed to her delayed

matriculation into her dream school and continued as she attended college there. While they made her journey more difficult, she persisted and overcame them all. She has maintained good grades throughout her matriculation at the university and is graduating soon.

Shontae

Shontae had every intention of going to a university right out of high school, but she experienced hardships that prevented her from completing her degree as a traditional student and delayed her reentry for well over a decade. As Johnson-Bailey (2001) explained, “So many of the choices made by reentry women—marriage, children, and career choices—were made when they were younger. Many of their earlier decisions were influenced by family and societal expectations” (p. 46). Shontae got pregnant right out of high school and she married her high school sweetheart. One child soon became three, and that’s when Shontae made the difficult decision to stop attending the local junior college and leave the workplace so that she could care for her three children while her husband was deployed overseas.

I married my high school sweetheart, but I should’ve just left him in high school. I had plans on going to college a couple hours away, but my dad, he really didn’t want me to go away from home, and then my boyfriend at the time, he graduated like a year ahead of me. He was in the National Guard. His goal was to go in the army full time, but he was gonna wait for me to graduate, so they kinda talked me out of it. But I ended up getting pregnant maybe like a month after I graduated high school. I had my baby the next year and got married the year after that.

After I got married, I started at [the local junior college], then I stopped. I stopped 'cause I needed the money, you know. I needed to work more. It was like I didn't feel like an adult really. It just kinda felt like I was still in high school, but I got a baby, so I just felt like I needed to be more independent in a sense. But 2 years after that, I got pregnant with my second child. I actually was concerned because I had some birth control that was supposed to last for 3 years, but then I had a cyst, and, in my mind, I was thinking, "I'll never have any more kids, let me get this taken out," and then I got pregnant with my second child. I had her, missed my doctor's appointment, went back to the doctor, and I was pregnant again. I missed a doctor appointment, and I went and he was like, "Congratulations!" And I'm like, "What? I just had a baby! What you talkin' about?" I went from one to three real quick!

I remember being pregnant when I was going to [the local junior college], but I stopped because I was pregnant, working, and then going to school, so then I stopped. My education was contingent upon if my husband was gonna go active duty. And me just trying to be independent and not going, "Mama, Daddy, you know I'm married and I need you to help me to pay for daycare." It was a lot. I was fresh out of high school, then I started school, then I stopped, then I started again, then I started working more. I did retail for a long time. I worked at three different department stores, and I was the assistant manager. Then I stopped working there, and that's when I did the whole CNA thing, but I was pregnant, so it was kinda hard. I was pregnant for basically 2 years. So, once I had both of them it made more sense for me not to work because I was working to pay for daycare, so I stopped working. Then I didn't start back working until my youngest started pre-K.

When I started back working, I went back to retail. I stopped doing CNA 'cause I was getting attached. I'm easily attached to people sometimes and it's like I'm crying, and it was too much for me, so I went back into retail. Actually, I worked at the wash house where I would just give people change, and then I started working in another department store, and I worked there for about 4 years and that was during my ex-husband's last deployment. Our relationship was just really, really rocky then we separated.

Shontae and her husband eventually divorced, which ultimately led to Shontae's decision to return to college and pursue the dream she deferred when she got married and pregnant right out of high school.

Zoe

The hardships Zoe experienced are evident by reading her life history narrative. Placed into the foster care system as a baby and eventually aging out of the system, Zoe grew up without a real sense of family. During the years she was with her mother, she experienced neglect and abuse. Although Zoe attempted to pursue a degree after graduating high school late, her longing for a family prevented her from focusing on school, and she was placed on academic probation, which ultimately influenced her decision to stop out of college and enter the workforce.

When I turned 18 I aged out of the system, but they still keep you. You graduate into independent living. With that, you have to stay in school and maintain a C average. I graduated a year or two behind 'cause I kept moving, and they didn't count some of the classes I took. After I graduated, I went to [a technical college] at first because it was a place to live. I stayed on campus. I graduated with my medical assisting there. Then I

moved [here], and I went to [the local junior college]. I went for my nursing degree, but I was put on academic probation. I had a lot on my mind. School was just not on my mind. It's hard without support. I mostly only had my pastor. She fulfilled that mother role, I would say. I met her when I was at the shelter here. She was the director of the shelter here when I was 15. I stayed in contact with her all these years.

I went to college after I graduated from high school. My head just wasn't in the game to be honest. I just really wasn't focused on school. When I was younger, my focus wasn't on what I wanted to do, it was more that I wanted a family. That was my focus. I was really focused on a family and why I didn't have a family and I was so emotional. I was so unstable, and I didn't know what to do. Now when I became older, it was just like, "Okay, I need to figure out what I need to do." I didn't really have that guidance to help me, "Okay, at this age you should be thinking about this, you should be," I was all over the place. It wasn't until I was 25 that I was like, "Okay, I need to have a career." And that's when I realized it was important to have a career, not just have a job. Being a medical assistant was not a career for me because it's not what I wanted to do. Now if that's what you like to do, that's different. That's not what I like to do. And so, I went back to school after 5 years. I decided to do social work because it was really what I wanted to do. Social work had always been on my mind, but I had this one lady who's a nurse at [the hospital] where I worked, and she talked to me and was like, "Well, Zoe, I feel like this is not you. I feel like you need to follow your own dreams and not everyone else's." And that's when I chose just to focus on social work.

I went back to [the local junior college], and I was still dealing with the emotions from my childhood, but I was just motivated. I still have issues, but it has gotten better. I

still suffer from it, but it's not as bad as it was because I've learned to adapt I guess. The whole family thing, it bothers me! Because at the end of the day, I'm still human. I just want a sense of family. I feel like I don't have a sense of family.

But really, to be honest, what changed for me this time was that I started going back to church. I don't know, but church—they give you a sense of purpose. And so, it was like I motivated myself because I don't want to be in this situation forever. I don't see myself as a medical assistant. I'm not happy here. I see myself—I don't know, I guess it was just a different outlook. Once you have a different outlook, then you can move forward. But I had a different outlook on life, and I just didn't want to be a medical assistant anymore. The church helped me because at that time, we were spending time together, so that was like a sense of family. And I was around people who were educated and who was going to school. My environment changed. That's what happened.

Zoe has still not gotten all the way past the emotions that resulted from her troubling childhood, but in finding a church family and observing her church members, she found the motivation to work around or through her painful emotions so that she can achieve her goal of earning a degree and working in a career.

Analysis

As prior research demonstrates, hardships are a common cause for women delaying entry into college immediately out of high school (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013). For Amber, Shontae, and Zoe, hardships were to blame for delaying their traditional entry into college as well, which fits into the broader context of existing literature on women like them. The hardships that these three women described

differed significantly from each other and in some ways, from related literature. The differences in types of hardships are important to note because they demonstrate how incredibly varied the lives of individual Black women can be.

While Shontae's hardships fit into existing scholarship on Black reentry women in terms of delaying college because of motherhood (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013), Amber's and Zoe's stories are instructive of how hardships are not necessarily always related to motherhood. Amber's hardships stemmed from financial and medical difficulties in her family and an overall lack of resources. With a family unit as strong as Amber's, it was not surprising that she delayed her reentry in order to support her family financially and care for sick father.

Zoe's hardships certainly do not fit the dominant narrative on hardships delaying college entry. While she did lack family support and other resources, which has been noted in the literature as a reason women delay traditional entry into college, Zoe blamed her emotional state that had resulted from her difficult and lonely childhood as the hardship that kept her from starting school as a traditional age student.

Marginalization and Barriers to Reentry

Some of the women in this study considered starting at the university sooner than they ultimately did, and they described the barriers that prolonged their reentry into college. This prolonged reentry is often the case with older women who wish to return to school. Feelings of unpreparedness and intimidation often serve as a barrier to reentry for adult women. They are unsure about their ability to succeed in the academic environment of the university. Additionally, Black women may be "poor, underpaid, undereducated, and marginalized because they have gone decades without sufficient

formal schooling” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013, p. 4). Furthermore, “Black women are often the recipients of an inferior elementary and secondary education, the effects of which are immediately realized when they enter college” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013, p. 2). This is true for Amber, Debbie, and Zoe who all point to their early childhood educational experiences as reasons they felt unprepared for university-level coursework. They eventually overcame the barriers and reentered college despite the intimidation they felt. To accomplish this feat, they started out small and attended local colleges to prepare them for the rigor of university coursework.

Many nontraditional women, like Amber, Debbie, and Zoe, often start out doing non-degree, technical, or junior college coursework to prepare themselves mentally and academically for the university (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). As Johnson-Bailey (2001) explained,

Testing of the waters is a common phenomenon among reentry women. Many women, in an attempt to judge whether or not they can handle school, participate in non-degree courses in their communities. Such ventures aid them in determining if they have the ability to learn new information and if they will be able to add responsibilities to their life. (p. 53)

As Amber, Debbie, and Zoe explained, they anticipated the rigor that would come with university-level coursework and were intimidated because they thought they were not prepared to be successful. By testing the waters at local technical or junior colleges, they were able to build the confidence and self-efficacy they needed to dive in at the university.

Amber

Having been homeschooled her whole life, Amber tested the waters at the local technical college where she met with success by graduating. She then spent several years out of school because of hardships before reentering at the university.

So, I said I'd wait a little bit on [Dabny] State. I knew that university courses are heavy, so I wanted to get me some courses where I could prep. I said I'll go back to [the technical school], and I'll get a diploma at [the technical college] in Accounting. I graduated in Fall 2011.

Debbie

I was a very good student at the local junior college, but I was very much intimidated about coming to a university. Always intimidated even with my success because it's like you never get through learning. It's always something else you can learn, so it's very intimidating when people are coming—especially with teachers 'cause they're the ones that have the knowledge. They can throw anything at you so it's intimidating when you're not sure about something.

And then, because of my age, some things you just feel like you should know that you might not know. Like one of my instructors was actually a lawyer so I had no knowledge about court. A lot of things that he would tell us, or say stuff, or words he would use—'cause my word usage wasn't that large with different types of words in different settings, so I didn't know. That's why I kept my dictionary because I didn't want to seem like, "Dog, you didn't know that? You're in your 50s and you didn't know what that word means?" So, you always intimidated because you wanna make sure you understand what they're saying. So, if it was something I didn't understand, I'd write it

down or if it was a word I wasn't familiar with, I would write it down, and when I get home, I would look it up so now when you use it again, I know what you saying.

Zoe

When I decided to go back to school, I went to [the local junior college] instead of coming here. I didn't take the SAT when I was younger, and I didn't think my GPA was good enough. I was just intimidated by the university. I didn't think I would get in. I was like, "If I graduate from [the local junior college], then I can transfer." I was intimidated. I really didn't understand the 4-year college system. I had good grades when I went to the junior college, but I don't know. I guess 'cause it's a step up from the junior college, you know? I never experienced that. I don't have any family that graduated from college so it's different. Everything was different to me.

Analysis

In her study of Black reentry women, Johnson-Bailey (2001) summarized this phenomenon that Amber, Debbie, and Zoe so closely epitomize:

The majority of women of color and poor women who return to college attend a community college. This point of entry has a higher dropout rate than traditional four-year institutions, but one advantage to attending a community college is that there are often remedial programs and more flexible class schedules. Playing catch up is particularly important in the sciences and mathematics for many returning women students. (p. 27)

Amber delayed attending the university because she felt unprepared to jump right into the water, so to speak, so she tested the waters by starting at the local technical college to get some foundational knowledge and help her prepare for what she expected might be more

rigorous courses at the university. Although she excelled in her program at the junior college, she still felt unsure of her ability to succeed at the university level.

Debbie and Zoe both decided to test the waters by starting small and attending a local junior college when they decided to reenter, rather than starting at the university level. They each described feelings of intimidation and wanted to see how they did at the junior college to see if they thought they could handle university coursework. Each of the women excelled at the junior college level but still felt intimidated by the university coursework.

The feelings that Amber, Debbie, and Zoe describe are common feelings found among other Black nontraditional women in the literature. Similarly, their successes are often found in related studies. As Johnson-Bailey (2001) explained,

Dealing with rusty study skills or having to face new materials is common among nontraditional college women. However, it is reassuring to know that once reentry women become accustomed to their new environment they perform much better than the traditional college student. They interact more frequently in the classroom and routinely report superior GPAs. (p. 78)

Despite their near crippling self-doubt upon reentering the university, Debbie and Zoe each graduated with Latin honors and have now been accepted into graduate school. Amber, also beset by self-doubt about her ability to succeed at the university level, reports a high GPA and also expects to graduate with Latin honors.

The Decision to Reenter College

Despite the hardships, marginalization, and barriers to reentry that precluded traditional matriculation into college, the women in this study did eventually find a way

back into school. They relayed the stories about reentering college in their interviews, and during the analysis, I found that the reasons the women returned to college fell into two themes: experiences and values. I inductively arrived at these two themes, although I discovered many of the subthemes comprising these larger themes in the related literature and used them as *a priori* categories in the data analysis phase of the project.

Experiences

The experiences that the women in this study described that led to their reentry fell into one or a combination of the following themes: outside encouragement, coping with challenges, and life's critical moments. Sealey-Ruiz (2007a), who has written extensively on the topic of Black reentry women, identified two of these themes—coping with challenges and life's critical moments—in a qualitative study examining events that precipitated the decision her participants made to reenter college. I found these themes after I had read my transcripts several times and was immediately struck by how appropriate they were to the reasons my participants had returned to college. For this reason, I used these two themes as *a priori* categories as I coded the data.

The theme of outside encouragement emerged as I coded the data and found that my participants heeded advice from friends, family, or colleagues who urged them to return to school. In a survey study on reentry college women, Thomas (2001) identified a similar theme, which she called “key sources of support,” as over 40% of her participants acknowledged that another person had encouraged them to return to school. I chose to call this theme “outside encouragement” because the people who encouraged the women to return to school did only that and did not necessarily stick around as a source of support.

Outside Encouragement

Debbie and Kayla credited a source of outside encouragement who helped them make the decision to reenter college. Feeling lost after losing a job she loved because her new boss thought she lacked the appropriate credentials to hold the position, Debbie finally found a way into college with the help of a former professional contact. Debbie admitted that without this encouragement and assistance, she might not have returned to college. Kayla's curiosity about her licensed colleagues' salary led to a conversation that put Kayla on the path to reentry into college.

Debbie. I knew I needed to go back to school. I was—in a sense—I was so hurt. I didn't know. And I said, "I'm going back to school." I went to [the junior college] because Heidi Hilson was instrumental in helping me. When I was working at the alternative school, I met Heidi who was working as a mentor at [the junior college] and I asked her to have some of her students come over that was in her program at that time. When I told her that I was leaving the program, but I still wanted her to work with the children because they had a good bond, she said, "Well what are you gonna do?" as though she was gonna try to help me to get a job. I told her I didn't have a degree. And she said, "You don't have a degree?" And I was like, "No." And it was a program that [Dabny State] and [the junior college] had together; it was an initiative to get African American males to come to college. So, she said, "Well I'll put you in my program." And the way Ms. Hilson did it, it was so—she walked me through the whole process.

So, I didn't know what to take, and at that time it was human services technology because again, I was working with a lot of people, and I was helping them out so that sounded closest to what I wanted to do. And so, because Ms. Hilson had offered me that

assistance, I worked hard because I didn't want to let her down. And she talked to me and even after she left [the local junior college], the grant money was still there. The lady that was there after she left, she told her that I was coming through and that I was a part of that program, and they rewarded me.

My husband went with me when I applied because he graduated from [the local junior college] too. It was like I was following in his footsteps. The thing about it that made it so special, every award that my husband got, I got. He got an award for outstanding student in the program and so did I. Every time he do something, I do it and that's what makes it so special. She gave me the one for outstanding student because I had the highest average in her program, so she awarded me before I left. That program gave me my first calculator, that TI-84. And they got me my books. They paid for everything. Everything.

Kayla. So, when I started meeting people, they do what I do, but they make tons of more money than I do because they have a license. So, [my client's social worker] can come in and do exactly what I'm doing and where I make \$9, she makes \$26, but she's doing the same exact thing I'm doing! When I read her notes, her notes sound exactly like my notes, but my notes have mental health worker and her notes have licensed clinical social worker [LCSW], but they read almost exactly the same. So, I pulled her off one day and I started talking to her because I read her notes. So, I said, "I'm not trying to get in your business or anything, but um, what do you get paid?" And she was like, "I didn't want to step on your toes, but I thought you'd be great doing this. I've watched you with clients and I think you'd be amazing at doing this."

Analysis. In Thomas's (2001) survey study, she quantified the various "key sources of support," as she called them, who had encouraged her participants to return to college. As mentioned, she found that over 40% of reentry women received outside encouragement to return to college, most commonly from a supervisor or a parent (Thomas, 2001, p. 145). She found ethnic differences as well. More Black women than White women identified a work supervisor or parent as the person who urged them to return to school. White women were more likely to name their spouse as the source of support.

Of the six women in my study, Debbie and Kayla were most like the women in Thomas's (2001) study. They both received outside support or encouragement from colleagues at work who had been to college before, but who were not their supervisors. Debbie received outside encouragement to return to college, and that person also served as a "key source of support" while Debbie was in the junior college (Thomas, 2001). Kayla's outside encouragement less directly influenced her decision to reenter; instead, that person encouraged Kayla to pursue licensure that would require her to return to college. It was this conversation that immediately preceded Kayla's reentry into college. Significantly, the other four women in my study did not specifically name an outside source of support or encouragement, which suggests an internal source of support instead.

Coping with Challenges

Women often reenter college as a way of coping with challenges they are experiencing, particularly with regard to their careers (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a; Thomas, 2001). As Johnson-Bailey (2001) found with the women in her study,

like countless women who returned to school after their thirties, reentry was connected to employment. Not only do they work toward a degree so that they can progress in their jobs, but frequently they are attempting to sort out their careers, change career directions, or acquaint themselves with other career options. (p. 42)

The experiences that Kayla and Zoe described that led to their decision to reenter college fell within this theme.

Kayla. So, then I started working in mental health, and mental health is really stern with degrees and different things like that. So, I started working in mental health and I really, really loved it, but you can't climb the ladder in mental health. You gotta have some degrees because you're responsible for so many things. You gotta have a certain license to do what I wanna do. I'm stuck right now because I can't do what I want to do because I'm not a LCSW.

So, I wind up having to go back to school, and so that's where I graduated from [the local junior college] last May with an Associate in Science. I would've continued school there, but because it's a junior college, they don't have as many degrees to offer and you know, [the local junior college] is like a really agricultural school. If you're not into farming—I did what I could and left. I graduated. I got whatever I could—the foundation—and I left. And that's what led me here. I actually wind up here because [a professor] actually came to [the local junior college] to talk to us. Her and her little staff came to talk to us, and they were telling us different things and stuff like that so that's how I ended up here.

Zoe. And so then at 25, I decided that I was gonna go back to school. That was strictly out of the motivation to have a career. I was still dealing with the emotions from my childhood, but this time, I was just motivated.

Analysis. After stopping out of college as a traditional student because of emotional and financial issues, Kayla entered the workforce as a caregiver for a psychiatric client. After over 10 years in this field, Kayla describes the moment she decided to reenter college. Despite being a full-time student and unlike some of the other women in the study who swapped a career for school, Kayla has continued to work full-time and is still a caregiver to the same client she has had for so long. She hopes that she is able to become an LCSW, which will afford her the opportunity to advance her career and earn more money.

Although Zoe had received postsecondary training allowing her to work as a medical assistant, she did not consider this line of work a career for her. She had tried to pursue a college degree several years prior to this reentry experience but stopped out because of the emotions that were still raw from her painful childhood without a family. Eventually, Zoe worked through the pain with the motivation she had to have a career and reentered college in hopes of earning a degree that would allow her to begin a career. Zoe's intentionality about staying focused on her goal of entering a career was obvious throughout her three interviews. She maintained that focus throughout her matriculation and used it to get through hard times.

Life's Critical Moments

In her study, Johnson-Bailey (2001) said that "many women ha[ve] a life event that reawaken[s] a dormant dream (p. 31). Initially, I coded for turning points as a

category I developed while memoing during the interview phase of my study. However, I found Johnson-Bailey's (2001) words to be true with some of the women in my study, so I decided to use her theme of life's critical moments instead. While the life events varied among my participants, the dormant dream of attending college and earning a degree that the life events prompted was common among Debbie, Shaquita, and Shontae.

Debbie. The eye-opening thing for me—I made a promise to myself that nobody else would ever take a job from me because I wasn't qualified or because of education. I mean that was devastating to me for someone to say that—that he went behind my back and went to my supervisor, which my supervisor knew that it wasn't required that I have a college education. It didn't even require that I have any higher education! I was getting all kind of accolades, and I was just devastated! Making a difference in the children's lives, bringing the families together—none of that mattered.

Shaquita. And so, after a year, I left [the private university] because my stepdad actually found out about me and [my girlfriend]. My stepdad is a pastor. My mom, everybody was just holy holy. I went back home with them, and I got prayed over, "Oh, shanananahalalalah!" He blamed himself, and he blamed my past experiences, but he blamed mainly himself because he said that as my spiritual leader and the head of this household, he should've been there to be able to block out all satanic attacks that was coming to get in his family, his children, things of that sort. So moreso, during that time we got closer because he pulled me closer to him. And he's like, "What happened in your childhood? I wanna know. And how do you feel about your daddy?" and stuff like that. He's always been the type—we call him dad, but he never ever disrespected my father. When we were mad at my father, he would tell us, "Sometimes God trusts people

to get you here, not to raise you.” He was like, “That’s what God trusted me to do—to raise you.”

But back to the praying the gay away. They prayed the gay away. Sweet Jesus. I just sat there, and I let them pray. I really just let them go through the motions, and I went through the motions with them. I would pray with them because I believe in God, so I pray. They never tried to hook me up with anybody or force me on anybody or anything. They just kinda did more of a spiritual cleanse. This is how I am. You’re not gonna make me do anything that I don’t wanna do. So, had he not tried to pray the gay away, I might’ve just not been gay. But it’s like the fact that’s he’s just like, “This is blasphemy to the Lord. You’re telling me—you’re telling God that he made a mistake?” And I’m like, “What mistake am I telling god that he made?” I understood his concept of transgender, telling God, “You made a mistake,” I get that. But I’m like okay, I’m still in my cisgender form. My identity now is the same identity that I was assigned at birth, so I’m not really telling God that he made a mistake.

[How did you feel about leaving school?] That’s the part that we actually fought about. We had a family fight because I was like, “Y’all are so selfish! Y’all were so worried about what I was doing with my life that y’all were willing to put a hold on it and stop my life because y’all just don’t want me to love somebody that I choose to love.” Education is not important to them. Reason being, education is not important to my mother because she just does not like school. She was not a good student. She graduated college as an adult. I went to her graduation. She got pregnant with me and my grandmother was like, “I’ll take care of Quita while you finish school,” and my mother was like, “No, you didn’t make her so I’m gonna take care of her. We’re gonna do this.”

So, my mom is kinda like because my grandmother was big on education and my aunt was big on education, she's not big on it, but she tries to play like it's important. She just says it 'cause that's what she wants to say, not 'cause it's what she truly feels.

Now my stepdaddy is a convicted felon with a rap sheet probably longer than the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of America. This man is so cool to me because this man is a pastor now. He went through this whole change his life thing. I think he dropped out of school when he was 15 and became a hotboy and started slinging dope. The reason education isn't important to him is because he did all that, lost all his money, and when he changed his life around he started learning trades and things like that and now he's an international banker, a financial consultant—I can't remember the things, but this dude banks. Like, he banks without even—man, my mom and dad got it made. My dad makes money laying in the bed watching tv and it pisses me off because he's always tried to teach me the value of hard work, and like you used to run around at 17 years old selling kilos across the border! But I will say he's big on finishing what you start. So, it's like with college right now, I told him, "Dad, if this semester doesn't go right, I'm gonna drop out," and he's like, "No, Quita, you're gonna graduate. You're gonna finish what you started because you are not a quitter." Now had I never started this and I had gone a completely different route, he would be okay with that.

So eventually, I came down here because I was trying to run away from praying the gay away. It was just like spiritual stuff, but it wasn't like some type of spiritual intervention. It wasn't like candles and séances. It was just we would wake up, and we would pray together. We'll go by our days regular. We would go to bed, we would pray together, and we might have little Bible studies. Me and my girlfriend ended up here

because whatever I say do, we're gonna do it. It was far, and I knew there was no reason for my parents to ever come down south. They go so many different places, but they never come here. So, I was like, okay, I could choose a spot, and I remember getting some letters and stuff from [the local junior college] for recruitment, and I was like, "Hmm, let me try this place. I'm gonna go where I think it's smart to actually exist and be able to freely be who I wanna be without having to worry about living under my parents' standards." So, I came down here—I didn't create a new identity, I'm still me, but I created this entire life for myself. It's like I came into my own. I was able to experience things, and I was able to express myself.

Shontae. I've been divorced a little over 4 years. In the same year, I got divorced, moved out, my daughter got retained, quit my job, and started school. My divorce completely changed my life. I went from being married and working full-time in retail to being a divorced mom and full-time college student who was not employed. I was like, "Are you gonna be able to do this? Are you sure?" I asked God, "You sure this is what you want me to do?" But our life got so much better. The relationship with my kids got better.

It was a pretty nasty divorce. He was cheating. People never really knew where I was 'cause he was always cheating. With him working with the local PD, it made him more mobile. He could move around. If he's parked at somebody house, you think he working, but he really laying up with somebody. He had a whole family! I had no idea. His mama was helping him. She helped him hide a lot of stuff. His mom had separated from his stepdad. All his mail was going to their house so once she moved her mail, somehow his mail started coming to our house, and I got a letter from child support

enforcement. At the time, he was in transition from the local PD to the National Guard. He was being activated so it was a gap in him paying his child support. So anyway, they sent mail and here it is—three kids.

I was floored! Three children! He had a family! And, another girl was pregnant! He mom was keeping the baby and everything. It felt like I was in the twilight zone. I can't be naïve and say I didn't know he was cheating. I knew he was cheating. I had done caught him because I turned into a private eye. I started checking his phone, but I never placed my finger on him. I was like, "Oh my god." He done went and took blood tests, been to the child support office, everything! I'm just like, "Where was I?"

He was already deployed when I found out. We talked. He apologized, and he was like, "We should just move away. We should move away and start over." Like you could just erase kids! You still gonna have to take care of these kids, and they were little little, like 1 or 2! I said, "This is what I'm gonna do." I was talking to his sister-in-law and I said, "What I'm gonna do is if he sends money, I'm gonna put it in the account, and I'm gonna be gone." Well, she told him, and then all of a sudden, every time he would send me money it would be enough to pay this bill, or he'll try to pay it online, so it was kinda like he was really monitoring the money and everything. I moved out because he wasn't gonna move out at all. He was like, "I'm not going anywhere," kinda in a sense trying to force me to stay with him. I said bump it and moved out. Took the kids, moved out. Maybe 2 months later, he moved out. Once we separated, I was working so much. We had to be there at 9 am, and we would stay there until 9 pm, so it made it kinda hard for me to be a parent if I'm gone 4 or 5 days out the week.

My middle child, she was acting up in school, so I would have to leave work and go see what she had going on, and then I'll go back. I realized that I was working so much that I felt like I was about to lose my kids in the whole divorce process. You know how like some people, they'll say, "Well everything was okay until the parents got a divorce." Mama stopped being home, and I was so afraid because she was missing so much work because she's acting out because of what's going on at home. So, I had a conversation with her teacher. My kids, they love to read. Reading was never the issue, it was more so the math. Reading, you can forget how to conjugate a verb, and you can pick that back up no problem. But with math, if you don't get that first step, it's gonna be hell when you get to that third step. I had a conversation, and they kinda was saying, "Well with her being ADHD, we can go ahead and place her in the third grade, but she's still gonna struggle," so that's heartbreaking. So, I'm like, "What do I do?" I decided to let her stay in the second grade, so she can fully grasp the concept that she needed to grasp, but that bothered me because that made me feel like I was a bad parent. I left this man, if maybe had I not left, then she wouldn't be going through all these changes and everything. So, I was like, "What can I possible do?"

So, I'm very spiritual and everything, and I just really had a conversation with God— "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do. I'm just gonna follow whatever you want me to do." And all of a sudden, I was in the store and this lady came in and she was like, "You should go to [Dabny State]." And I was like, [sigh], "Do the school thing again?" So, I decided, I said, "You know what? I'm gonna go to school." So, I filled out all the paperwork, and it was like hell just trying to get registered for classes. I sat out here all day, asking people, "Where's so-and-so building?" and they're like, "I don't know." You

know, 'cause people don't really know building numbers, and a lot of people don't know the actual name of buildings. So, I'm like, "How you don't know?" You out here, you walking around!

So, by the time I got my classes registered, my classes were all over the place. I had a night class, a morning class, it was chaotic. So, I told my district manager and I said, "Well I really only need one night off a week," which would be a Wednesday night or something. It was another girl and she was getting her master's in public administration, and she had come back; she was getting it from here. So, our schedule, it would be okay, but it would just be that one night a week that it would conflict. And our manager, she was actually on maternity leave, so she was like, "Well we can't make those adjustments for you, so if you can't change your classes, you can just resign." And I was like—I had been there for like 4 years, "I'm always here, I'm dependable." And I had a conversation with my dad and he was just like, "Well whatever we need to do, we'll do. Whatever you need me to do, I'll do." And we talked about the kids and how it was affecting them, and I really wasn't gonna be able to stand it if I keep going this route, and now I'm picking up school. So, he said, "Well just give it up." And I was like—because I still wanna be independent. I still wanna be this adult. I prayed about it, and I quit. So, I didn't have another job until May of last year.

If I would've stayed married, I wouldn't have gone back to college. I don't think the motivation would have been there. I was like, "I'm gonna go to school and I'm gonna get my degree so he will see that I'm not just some stay-at-home mama or assistant manager at a department store. I felt like he kinda looked down on me in a sense. It was just like, "Oh, that's all you do? Yeah, you can work at another retail store, so what?"

That takes nothing. You did it when you was in high school, you can do it now.” When I started back to school, I think he thought I wasn’t gonna finish. Like, “Oh, she’s just doing something.” I feel like I made the right decision to go back to school. I’m happy with it.

Analysis. In her life history narrative, Debbie described being forced to resign from a job she loved because her new boss learned that she did not have a college degree. Although she did not immediately start school preceding this event, the impact it had on her was lasting and eventually contributed to her ultimate decision to reenter college and pursue a degree. Debbie went on to work in another position where she found a passion for social work. Soon she decided to formalize this passion into a degree and began attending the local junior college and eventually transferred to the HBCU to finish her bachelor’s degree in social work.

Shaquita experienced a critical moment in her life that led her to stop out of one college, take an extended break, and return to another school far enough from home that she could be away from her family and free to express herself. Shaquita and her live-in girlfriend have continued their openly lesbian relationship in South Georgia. Her parents do not know that she and her girlfriend are living together or even that her girlfriend has also moved to the area to be with Shaquita.

Like Debbie, Shontae had entered college as a traditional student but stopped out to be a stay-at-home mother and wife. She describes how her painful and unexpected divorce led to her decision to reenter college. Perhaps more than anyone else in the present study, Shontae perfectly exemplified how life’s critical moments can inspire

women to reenter college and fit most closely with the existing literature on Black reentry women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013; Thomas, 2001).

Values

In addition to specific life events that led the women in the present study to reenter, I found during my analysis that they described values that influenced their reentry as well. Daiute's (2014) definition of a value guided my identification of values in my analysis. She defined values as "culturally-specific goals, ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting in response to environmental, cultural, economic, political, and social circumstances" (Daiute, 2014, p. 68-69). She noted that people will often not explicitly state their values, so in identifying my participants' values, I searched for things or ideas that they seemed to find important (Daute, 2014). I organized the values they described into the following sub-themes: being a role model, having a career, and having an education. These themes are also present in the literature on reentry women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013; Thomas, 2001).

Being a Role Model

Literature on reentry women points to the value these women place on being a role model, specifically to their own children (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013). Only two of the six participants in the present study are mothers. Debbie is a mother to four adult children and Shontae is a mother to three adolescent children. Both women noted the importance of earning a degree to be a role model, but only Shontae specifically mentioned being a role model to her children. Debbie, who was working with high school children at the time, decided to return to school, yet she considered

herself a maternal figure to those children and valued being a role model to them. As Johnson-Bailey (2001) found, this was the case with

many reentry women with adolescent or young adult children [who] say that the decision to return to school was made partially to inspire their children to also pursue a higher education. This demonstrates how women incorporate the caregiver role into their lives even when following their own dreams. (p. 76)

Debbie's children had already graduated from college by the time she reentered, so she did not specifically place value on being a role model to her own children, but she did exemplify the caregiver to which Johnson-Bailey (2001) referred.

Debbie. When I was working in the schools, I couldn't tell children—and that was another reason that it was imperative that I go to school—I was seeing children that wasn't motivated to go to school, so how I could tell them to continue their education if I didn't have one? I couldn't because I couldn't say, "Oh, it's gonna be easy or it couldn't be hard." I haven't done it yet. So now when they call, "I'm telling you it's gonna be rough, but if you want it, you can get it." So, I've graduated with some of the students that I worked with! And them just seeing me, it made a difference. It was a good thing for them to be able to say, "Mrs. Richards finished." And I've taken classes with students at [the local junior college] that I worked with, and I dare not let them see me fail! That whole time I'm taking care of them, I'm saying, "You got your work? Are you doing what you supposed to do?" So that made a big difference, and when I look at it now in hindsight, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Shontae. With being a single parent and me pushing college, me pushing education to my kids—the expectation is for them to go to college. We don't talk about

babies. We don't talk about marriage. I told them, "Y'all gonna go to college." My 16-year-old, she's always said she wants to be an attorney so we're always talking about that. I was telling my children they're gonna go to college, but I had not gone. It was a contradiction. Like, "You need to go to college." But then I was like, "How can I tell them that they need to graduate college when I've had every opportunity to do it myself?" You know, "Am I gonna be the example?" So that's where I was with that, so it makes sense. I did it. You can do it.

I was working so much, and it was like I was there helping my ex-husband do what he needed to do for himself while we were married, and then I wake up and it's like, "What do I have for myself?" I want them to have themselves. Like my dad told me, "Go ahead and graduate college before you get married." I felt like if my mom would've pushed the issue then I would've went ahead and got finished and did all of that that I needed to do. I want to make sure they do that before they even start talking about a family.

Analysis. Sealey-Ruiz (2007a) echoed Johnson-Bailey's (2001) and Thomas's (2001) findings in a study on Black reentry mothers when she concluded that the women in her study were motivated to enter college to be a role model for their daughters and "decided to stay the course and use their lives as a testimony that Black mothers have the ability to endure and manage difficult situations, raise families while pursuing their educational goals" (p. 10). The stories that Johnson-Bailey (2001) and Sealey-Ruiz (2007a) presented are significant counter-narratives to the stereotypes that persist about Black motherhood. By sharing their values about being a role model to their own children and others, Shontae's and Debbie's stories support the conclusions in these

earlier studies and serve as important counter-narratives to these persistent negative stereotypes about Black motherhood as well.

Having a Career

Existing scholarship demonstrates that Black women often reenter college out of a financial need to have a career but does not necessarily present it as a value (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; Thomas, 2001). In the present study, the way Zoe talked about her desire to have a career seemed to better fit the definition of value in that she attributed a great deal of importance to having a career instead of just a job.

Zoe. When I was younger, my focus wasn't on what I wanted to do [in terms of a career], it was more I wanted a family. That was my focus. Now when I became older, it was just like, "Okay, I need to figure out what I need to do." I didn't have that guidance to help me, "Okay, at this age you should be thinking about this." I was all over the place. It wasn't until I was 25 when I was like, "Okay, I need to have a career." And that's when I realized it was important to have a career, not just have a job. Before I thought it was just to have a job, to have an income. Being a medical assistant was not a career for me because it's not what I wanted to do. Now if that's what you like to do, that's different. That's not what I like to do.

I feel like I'm in a career now, and not a job. That's important. I feel like the mentality that my siblings have is—a job. Just have a job. It doesn't matter—McDonald's, Burger King. My thing was, I shouldn't be in this situation next year. Next year I should be somewhere else. I should be at a different level. Growth is very important to me. I should not be in the same situation I was last year. That's how I look

at life. I've consistently gone up. I started working in the fast food joint to working in a nursing home to working in a hospital to now working as a child care counselor.

Analysis. Zoe valued having a career instead of a job and saw college as the best opportunity to achieve that, which contributed to her decision to reenter college as a nontraditional student. She explained how her mindset changed as she grew older. When she originally started college after high school, she focused on all that she was missing in her personal life to the detriment of her academics. As she got older, she aspired to have a career and she set a goal to achieve that. Actualizing that goal required Zoe to reenter college. In our conversations, she reflected on her growth and how she's achieved her goal of having a career. Prior to graduating, Zoe began working in the field of social work. Zoe visited me recently to share more good news. After graduating with her bachelor's degree in social work, Zoe recently landed her dream job as a child protective services investigator.

Having an Education

Only two of the women in my study cited the value of an education as a contributing factor for them returning to college. For both of those women, family members instilled the value of an education within them. Amber only briefly referred to this family value when she said, "Always growing up, my parents instilled in me, 'Get your education.'" Debbie, always careful to articulate the role others have played in her achievements and credit them for their contributions to her success, remembered her stepfather's words and how they impacted her values regarding education as a child.

Debbie. My stepfather told me that he wanted me to go to school and get a good education. He was like, "Go to school so you don't have to be up under the feet of

nobody. You need to get an education ‘cause I didn’t get an education.” He wanted me to get an education. He was just saying, “So you can get a job. You can’t get a job without having a good education.” I contribute my educational success to my stepfather because he laid the foundation for me to continue my education.

Analysis. Although Amber did not speak at length about her parents’ value of education, the importance of what she did say cannot be understated. Amber often spoke proudly about the values that her parents “instilled” in her. The use of the word “instilled” is important because it demonstrates the deeply embedded and ingrained values that guide Amber’s actions and decisions. Interestingly, in addition to Amber’s parents instilling within her the importance of an education and always being respectful to others, Amber says her parents taught her that “wherever you go, don’t look down” on the college or where you work. This lesson explains why even though her initial experience with the HBCU was frustrating, Amber never spoke ill of the institution or the people staffing the offices.

The Decision to Attend the HBCU

Finally, the women also explained why they chose Dabny State University, the reasons for which fell into the following categories: family connection and convenience. I arrived at the categories in section inductively, though in reexamining literature related to Black reentry women, I did find that Johnson-Bailey (2001) cited convenience as a deciding factor when the women in her study chose a college to attend. Equally important was the role of a family connection in helping the women in my study decide where to attend college. Interestingly, none of the women specifically chose to attend this school because of its status as an HBCU. In fact, four of the women—Debbie,

Kayla, Shaquita, and Zoe—all indicated a preference for the diversity of the prior institution they attended. I consider this one of the most surprising findings from my study, and I expand upon this in the final chapter of this study.

Family Connection

In reading existing literature on Black reentry women, I never came across a family connection as a determining factor when these women select a college to attend. Although I arrived at this category inductively, I was not surprised that some of the women in this study referred to a family connection when explaining why they chose to attend Dabny State University. Having worked at this HBCU for several years, I have met many students whose family members are alumni. The HBCU has always had a very strong “old” alumni base and although they do not provide large financial contributions, the alumni groups in cities across the state are a strong source of regional recruitment. Additionally, having heard the intimidation these women felt about returning to school made it unsurprising that they may select an institution with some semblance of familiarity to ease their fears about attending a university.

Amber

It’s always been my dream to come to [Dabny State]. Me and my sister grew up at [Dabny State]. My mother and father took us to homecoming ever since I was little. They brought us up around all this. They had cousins that went to [Dabny State] and other family friends went to [Dabny State] and we just grew up here. Every year, we went to homecoming, the parade, and the football games so I’ve always had the atmosphere of it. It’s always welcoming and everything. I knew it was a athletic school,

but ain't know coming up—like they told us, “It's a HBCU,” and so I learned about the history. That's great.

Debbie

Some of Debbie's closest family members attended Dabny State University, which provided her with a necessary familiarity when she decided to return to school. Debbie remembered her mother's fondness for the school.

My mother was a graduate of [Dabny State]. She attended [Dabny State] a long time ago when it was called [redacted] School. She took home economics. She loved [DSU]! My husband and I would always buy her paraphernalia. She loved that school. She would talk about the history all the time. I always said, “I'm gonna research that.” I really wanted to know what [the founder's] vision was and to really see are we anything closer or further away from it or what. My mother died in 2006. I wanted to do it because she went and I wanted to go.

One of Debbie's daughters attended Dabny State out of sheer convenience. Raised in the area, her daughter was accepted at other institutions but was uncomfortable with the living arrangements of dorm life.

She said, “I'll stay home.” She didn't like the close quarters in the colleges. And so, since [DSU] was down the street—and I was like, “You did all that just to . . . ?” And she said, “I'm not ready. I'm not mature enough to leave.” So, she stayed home to go to school. She went to [Dabny State]. She didn't want to live in the dorms.

Debbie's husband took the lead in helping their oldest daughter get into Dabny State University. Additionally, Debbie's husband earned a bachelor's, master's, and

specialist's degree at Dabny State. She explains how that helped her when she decided to go to school.

At that time, I really didn't know how to start it 'cause I had not started. They started college before I did, so I said, "You help them in college, as far as applying and talking to teachers and the administration and all of that." So, when I came along, I kinda knew what to do because I saw him help them.

Kayla

I wanted to come here because first of all, this is my godbrother's alma mater. My brother—my godbrother—this is his alma mater, so I thought, "Okay if I go here, they love him." And I was like, "Okay if I go they know him and things will be so easy for me." Like he knows the ex-president. He has the president in his speed contacts, the mayor, all these people from [the city]. They love him. It's alumni so I kept it in the family.

Analysis

For Amber, Debbie, and Kayla, a family connection was an important factor in helping them decide on Dabny State University as the school they would attend. The fact that family potentially serves as a source of recruitment, however unintentional it may be, is significant because it demonstrates the importance of producing satisfied graduates who can essentially magnetize their immediate and extended family members to Dabny State University.

Convenience

Four of the participants have lived in the city where the university is located for many years, so as adult women who have roots firmly planted in the area and other

responsibilities that prevent them from traveling to another university in the region, attending the local HBCU was simply a matter of convenience. All of the women attended a local junior or technical college in the same or a nearby city before transferring to Dabny State, so the university was an obvious next step. Only Shontae had a long period of time pass between attending the junior college and making the decision to start at Dabny State. The rest graduated from the other local school and immediately started at the university.

Shaquita

[Dabny State] was at first convenient. I didn't want to have to pick up and move somewhere. I'm just gonna transfer to the next best thing. There's a university right there. I'll go. The fact that it was an HBCU made it so much better until I got here.

Shontae

When I decided to come back to school, [Dabny State] was really my only option because with the amount of classes I had to take I couldn't travel back and forth to [a nearby city to the southeast] or [a nearby city to the northeast].

Analysis

The decision to choose a college based on convenience is a way that nontraditional women negotiate and overcome barriers, a point Johnson-Bailey (2001) made in her study when she concluded that nontraditional women "negotiate challenges" like those described earlier to include "choos[ing] colleges in close proximity to their homes" (p. 94-5). Although Shaquita had moved several hours from home to come to college in this city, it was not with the intention of attending the HBCU, but the local junior college. Having limited resources that prevented her from moving elsewhere, the

convenience of the HBCU led her there. Shontae has roots firmly planted in the area and relies on her parents to help with her children, so moving or commuting to another city was not a viable option for her, so these barriers meant she had no choice but to settle for Dabny State University. Having made the decision to reenter college and attend Dabny State University, the women next decided upon a path to pursue in college.

The Passion behind Selecting a Major

For the women in this study, selecting a major was a deeply personal decision informed by their past life experiences, their present job situation, and their future career goals. Five of the six women selected a major that would quickly provide them with marketable skills in this region, but that also had a close connection to their passions or life experiences. Those five women were all happy with their choice of major. The one participant who did not enjoy her major, Shaquita, chose a liberal arts program and did not enjoy the curriculum, nor did she feel like she had any clear direction about her career moving forward.

Four of my six participants majored in social work when they reentered college, and they were very intentional about selecting that major. Most importantly, they wanted a career and this program seemed to be the best path to achieving that goal. All four of them indicated the desire to have a career instead of a job. Debbie and Kayla selected social work for the express purpose of achieving career goals. Debbie wanted to reenter the workforce as a professional career woman and Kayla wanted to advance her current career in the mental health field, but she also indicated a more personal and intrinsic reason for choosing social work. For Zoe and Shontae, their choice of social work was deeply personal and became a passion for them, but also indicated a strong desire to have

a meaningful career. Amber also had a passion that drove her choice of major at the university. As their life stories demonstrate, each one experienced hardships in their lives, and those hardships influenced their choice of major.

Amber

I chose healthcare management as my major because growing up I loved health—like healthcare. I liked to—if I got hurt, I doctored on myself. If my parents got hurt or got sick or anything, I was the little—they called me the little nurse. Even my sister do. Even up until this day, the little nurse and everything because whenever they got sick, I'd always be touching them. Even now I can't concentrate when my parents are sick.

I was interested in health and even the subject when I was in school. I loved the surgical subject and everything. So, at first, I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be a nurse, but then I realized I can't stand blood. I can't stand the sight of blood. I can't stand the sight of blood, and I can't stand disturbing images and everything. So, I was like, "Okay what am I going to do?" So, I'm like, "I still wanna be in healthcare, but then I also have a knack for finance and the business department," so I was like, "Why don't I combine the two?" I was like, "I'm not sure."

Healthcare management, that's a wide-open field. It's really massive 'cause I mean, you have a business degree, but it's even a mixture of both 'cause you can choose any position. I didn't know it was that many positions until during my freshman year when it was like, "Okay you supposed to be looking for a career choice now." I don't know what I'm gonna do now 'cause it's so many positions. I'll narrow it down later, but I'm not sure what position I want, but I'll decide later 'cause it's so many. Everything seem to be going good and everything.

Kayla

Most social workers come from horrible backgrounds. That's why we're trying to change the world! Because you've been molested, or you've been raped, so most people who are social workers have lived that life, and we're determined to try and change somebody else's life because we didn't have nobody there for us.

Shontae

I chose social work, but I actually wanted to do mental health and alcohol addiction. That relates back to my life experience. And I wanted to more so do it with children because I know how it feels sometimes to be like, "Oh, God. He's drinking again." Even though he wasn't abusive or nothing, it was just the mere fact, you know? I didn't want friends over because I didn't want nobody to know he was a drunk. I didn't want anybody to know that.

Also, social work is kinda missionary work. You know, it's just about helping people get past things, helping people get through things. It's understanding what their issues are, so they can make things better for themselves and for their families. So, with it being missionary work, and with me being in the church, it just made sense.

Zoe

I decided to do social work because it was really what I wanted to do. When I started back, I was nursing at first. I was nursing for maybe a year because I was still doing my core classes. I was trying to do both, but I had this one lady who's a nurse at the hospital where I worked, and I would tell her personal stuff like what I'm telling you. She talked to me, and she was like, "Well Zoe, I feel like this is not you. I feel like you need to follow your own dreams and not everyone else's." And that's when I chose just

to focus on social work. Social work had always been on my mind, but society thinks that people should go for nursing. I'm happy with my decision.

Social work has a lot to do with how I grew up. When I recently reconnected with my mother, I told her about what I was going to school for. She didn't seem like she was happy. She was like, "Well why didn't you do occupational therapy because that's the money and stuff." And that's when I realized, "Okay, she don't know me. She don't know who I am." It's not about the money. So, it was just like, there's no point in getting mad. It is what it is. She just don't—we don't connect on that level. 'Cause if she knew, she would understand like, "Okay, I've been in this situation. This is why." But even when I tried to explain it to her, it's like she don't wanna listen because then she would have to face what she did when she was younger. That the reason I'm in social work is because of her! She's in denial. She thinks that we had a good childhood. I don't know how she could think that. I think that's what she told herself all these years to help her cope. It was a mechanism. That's what I think. So, in her eyes, we did. But we didn't. She believes it. She does. And I was like, "Okay, but it's been 15 years. How could you?" But if it's in your mind and you believe it, then—. There was nothing good about it to me. Nothing! It was nothing! Psh, I have six siblings. I should've known my siblings. We should know each other, but we don't.

It's hard, but the whole reason I got into wanting to learn about foster care is because of this one particular situation where I was in foster care, and I was in this one group home and it was this one girl, her name was Beth. At that time, I think she was like 16, and she was just depressed because of lack of family support. She made me watch her try to commit suicide. I was 16. I knew. I could understand. I could

empathize with her. I knew her struggles, and I knew because it was something I knew I wanted to do, but it never worked for me. Never worked. I took a bottle of pills, and it didn't work, so I was just like, "Nah. I'm gonna stop." I was depressed. I went to a mental facility—a mental hospital. I was 16.

Analysis

Existing literature does not reveal intentions behind Black women's selection of a major when they return to college as adults. As I was reading the interview transcripts, I inductively generated the theme of selecting a major and realized that on the surface it seemed driven practically by career goals, but the real motivation behind the selection of a major seemed driven by passion. The satisfaction in their choice of major is likely because passion guided their choice. As I have learned in my own experience in college, when I am passionate about what I am studying, I tend to be more satisfied with the experienced and pleased with the outcome.

Interestingly, in researching why so many of my participants may have wanted to pursue a career in social work, I found an economic theory that may help explain this historical phenomenon. In examining the reasons why Black women were employed as social workers during the Great Depression, Robert Boyd (2018) offered sheltered market labor theory as a possible answer because this theory holds that minorities may pursue social work occupations where they can serve co-ethnic clients that the majority group tends to avoid serving, thus avoiding occupational discrimination. The women in my study did not mention a specific desire to serve co-ethnic clients, but instead indicated a desire to help those who may have experienced similar issues that impacted them as children and young adults (such as self-image, homelessness, foster care, and

alcoholism). Nonetheless, the historical underpinnings for African American social service employment are documented and could have indirectly influenced my participants' choice of major.

Conclusions

In conducting thematic analysis on my data, I found that the women all relayed stories that I was able to weave together collectively into a narrative that began with their decision to reenter college and then drill down even further to explore the reasons behind their selection of the HBCU and finally, the passion that drove their specific choice of major. The results of this analysis show that the women in this study, while they all followed a similar storyline that fits into the broader narrative about reentry women, had different experiences and values that make their stories unique. By using women's voices to construct this narrative, this chapter privileges and honors the women as they highlight the uniqueness of their individual decisions to reenter college.

The life histories contained in this narrative alone are instructive of the within-group differences that exist in a small sample of Black women. Amber, Kayla, and Shontae grew up in two-parent households, but suffered hardships including homelessness and poverty for Amber, feelings of maternal rejection for Kayla, and an alcoholic father for Shontae. Debbie and Shaquita grew up in blended families and both credited their stepfathers with instilling the value of an education within them. Zoe, unlike any of the other women, was raised in and out of the foster care system. While her difficult childhood continues to pain her, it also developed an incredible resilience within her.

Although the reasons the women delayed entry into college fell within two themes and generally fit within existing scholarship on these women, they were unique with the exception of Debbie and Shontae, whose experiences were similar to each other and have been noted in related literature. Both Debbie and Shontae became young mothers and were married right out of high school. As a result, they both delayed college and eventually became stay-at-home-mothers who supported their husbands while they were in the military and in the post-military careers they entered. Kayla attempted to attend college immediately after high school, but with a lack of support from her parents, she eventually stopped out and entered the workforce. Similarly, Shaquita stopped out of college because her parents stopped supporting her, but that was only because they disapproved of her being in a lesbian relationship. Amber, beset by homelessness and a sick father, lacked sufficient resources to attend the university and delayed her entry until her family's situation improved. Zoe also stopped out of college as a traditional age student but blamed her emotional state above all else.

New findings about Black nontraditional women students resulted from this study with regard to their decision to attend an HBCU. Perhaps the most interesting finding from the women's decision to return to school was that none of them decided to attend Dabny State University because of its status as an HBCU. Rather than being driven by the history of the school, the women chose this particular institution because they either had a family connection to it or it was simply the most convenient school for them to attend.

Finally, I found that passion developed from life experience largely drives Black women's selection of a major. All of the women in this study reentered college after a

prior stint and none of them selected the same major as the one they had been in previously. This is indicative of a changing nature in their interests as they grew older and gained more life experience.

This chapter covered the life experiences that influenced the women's decision to reenter college and at Dabny State University and helped me answer my first research question. The next chapter covers the remaining three research questions and picks up with the challenges the women experienced and the ways they overcame those challenges, their experiences fitting into the campus culture, the meaning they made of experiences as students at DSU, their perspectives on their instructors and the curriculum, and how they persisted throughout their matriculation experiences.

Chapter V

AN EXAMINATION OF PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES IN COLLEGE

This chapter focuses on the experiences that the women in the present study had at Dabny State University, offered from the unique perspectives of the women themselves. Even though I have worked at this HBCU for the past 3 years, I was struck by how the women in this study made meaning of their experiences at this school. Having been a nontraditional student myself, I fully expected to hear stories of rigid course schedules and feeling a lack of inclusiveness in a youth-oriented college environment. I was most surprised, and frankly saddened, by the undue burdens and barriers stemming from the institution that the women had to strategically negotiate and overcome. Despite the barriers, challenges, and difficulties they faced as nontraditional students in an environment where they mostly felt unsupported and uncomfortable, these women persisted, persevered, and overcame, and each one has already or will soon achieve her goal of earning a college degree.

Overcoming Challenges

Being a nontraditional student brings challenges that the traditional student may not have to face and overcome. As Thomas (2001) pointed out, students like those in my study

often experience dispositional and situational challenges that can hinder their academic progress . . . includ[ing] multiple nonschool-related commitments and responsibilities, financial and family concerns, lack of an age cohort in the

classroom, insufficient support from family and friends, and limited social acceptability and support for their student status. (p. 140)

In describing their experiences in college at Dabny State University, the nontraditional women in this study described several challenges much like those Thomas (2001) described that they had to overcome as students. I organized these challenges into two categories—institutional barriers and interrole conflict—two common themes found in the literature on nontraditional students (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Thomas, 2001).

Institutional Barriers

All of the women in this study recalled experiences at the institution that unduly burdened them during or immediately preceding their matriculation, which I have categorized as institutional barriers. These institutional barriers prevented a smooth and seamless matriculation experience and included rigidity and lack of delivery options in course scheduling as well as an overall lack of organization and professionalism that made negotiating the academic and non-academic arenas unnecessarily and frustratingly complicated for the women.

Notably, many of the barriers the women described were non-academic. Attending other institutions prior to Dabny State University offered all of the women the benefit of comparison. More often than not, their experiences at the previous institution were more fondly recalled than their experiences at Dabny State, which translated to a great deal of lamenting about bad customer service, lack of immediacy, and disorganization at Dabny State.

Debbie

I didn't like the schedule they had for us. I think we should've had more evening programs because we were told that we could not work. I gave up a job that I loved to come to school because the classes was not taught in the evening. That's not good for a nontraditional student because now I'm out of a job. My classmate was a nontraditional student, but she had educational leave. The job that I had did not have that. So, she was able to return back to her job and whatever she learned, she could enhance it and use it on her job. But for me, it was gone. That was a big risk for me because I had almost 10 years on that job. Because I didn't make 10 years, all my retirement, they gave it back to me [paid out and taxed her retirement]. I was penalized twice for it because I only did 9 years. My school retired me.

If they would've had evening classes it would've worked a lot better—or gave the option where this class is taught in the afternoon or in the morning, or just one or two maybe taught in the daytime. We were just told, “You can't work and be in this program.” And this is not a master's, this is just a 4-year! You know what I'm saying? Of course—I considered that later on a lot of students were working, 'cause I had a couple students that were working, and so they did not have a lot of time. And like I said, I treated school like my job, so I had the time to put in to it. And I was very fortunate that I had a husband who could support me financially.

Kayla

Things at my other school were more organized than here. I feel like our education was better. I feel like they cared more. Things were way much more organized. I didn't have to jump through all these hoops that I have to jump through

here. The stuff that happens here, no! Not at [the junior college]! I took for granted that when they say our school check is gonna come on this day, our check is gonna come on this day. We took it for granted that our teachers are educated, and they come to teach us, not laugh and play and talk and make jokes. Our teachers taught us. This stuff I'm dealing with down here I never had to deal with at my school. Never!

It's like people here get an attitude. Customer service at [the junior college] is on point. If I call there and they tell me they're gonna call me back in 30 minutes, they're going to call me back in 30 minutes. They're gonna call me back in 15 minutes. When I say they dot their 'I's and cross their 'T's—like, you as a student matter. It's not like, “Ugh, oh my God, what you want? Why you calling?” If I call Financial Aid, they're gonna answer the phone. Then one day, when I applied [to Dabny State], I hadn't registered. I had to literally get in my car and drive down here. Mind you, I live 45 minutes away. There has to be somebody to get on the phone to assist me with my needs because I don't live here.

But they promised me how easy things would be as a transfer student, how they'll help me once I get there. But oh God, that's not what happened! It was a living hell! I faxed everything, emailed everything, but it took months to get back to me. I actually thought I would have to get in my car and drive down there. I didn't, but what I did was kept calling and they kept sending me from this person to this person to this person. You get a voicemail, you leave a message, 2 weeks later somebody still hasn't called you back. Of course, I'm trying to go to school, so I'm gonna call them back.

So, one day I got really, really fed up. I asked who was in charge. I didn't want to, but I said, “Okay these voicemails, I'm getting tired of this. I'm trying to go to

school.” I needed somebody to get on the move. I didn’t have time because I want to graduate. I’m 35. I want to go ahead and keep it moving because I’m later on in life. I’m not one of these 18 or 19-year-old children. I had a matter of weeks to get in school, so I didn’t have time to keep going to a voicemail and all that right there.

So, I finally got someone on the phone, and I told her what was going on, and I demanded to talk to somebody in charge. I would not let her get off the phone! I said, “You’re gonna tell me who’s in charge, and you’re gonna tell me today! Somebody’s gonna talk to me and somebody’s gonna talk to me today of who is in charge.” I told them who my godbrother was, and I told them that I knew the president, and if I had to pull his name into this it was gonna get ugly. So then when I said that, people started calling me back immediately. They started moving fast, like real fast! They started moving, and I got everything I needed that day when I had been calling them for weeks! As soon as I said “president,” oh it got done before I hung that phone up!

They started sending me emails saying they were sorry that it took so long. That part sucks. I can only see if somebody didn’t know the president or if somebody didn’t know somebody in charge what it would be like because I know what it was like for me until I name-pulled. So that part sucks. They definitely need to fix that because it will almost make you not want to go to the school if you gotta deal with all that.

Shaquita

The process, as far as dealing with the business aspect of it, all of that was kind of difficult. I applied online, but I got the run around from admissions. The application was lost at first. They were saying like, “Could you come to the office?” I’m like, “No, I can’t come to the office.” Personally, I didn’t feel like my presence was gonna change

anything. The admissions counselor made it hell. I had to order my transcript three times! When I had my transcript sent over it took a long time to get all my grades transferred over. I took a lot of my core classes already, so when I got here all I was expecting to do was just major courses. I wasn't expecting to have to take any type of core, but all of my courses didn't transfer over, so I took some classes that I didn't need. And I'm just like, "Can I get my money back?" But it's lost now. Also, because my courses didn't all transfer over, I can't graduate on time because I'm shy of elective hours. I'm done with all my other coursework, it's just elective hours that I'm missing! I don't play about my money, I don't play about my education, and I don't play about my time. So, when all those things are being compromised, I get pissed off!

Shontae

I did my application online, and it required some documentation, so I submitted the documentation, but then the documentation got misplaced. I had to resubmit it. Then when I came in, the receptionist wasn't very friendly or helpful. It was just kinda like, "Oh, we don't have it." So, I turned in what was needed, and I left. But then the second time, I waited and I'm like, "I need to talk to somebody because I need to give them this." I felt like I needed to start writing down names and not just handing people stuff.

I can't recall how long it took me to get accepted, like how long the process was for me from filling out the application to me getting accepted. I know that when it was time—when the semester was about to start, and it was registration, I knew that I should have had some type of information because it had been awhile, so I came out to the school, and I had to talk to three or four different people, and then they actually told me, "Yeah, you've been accepted." I had no idea!

Registration had already started. It was like hell trying to get registered for classes. It took me an entire day to register for classes. I sat out here all day asking people, “Where’s so-and-so building?” and they’re like, “I don’t know.” People don’t really know building numbers, and a lot of people don’t know the actual name of buildings. So, I’m like, “How you don’t know? You out here, you walking around!” I kind of fumbled around until I found the right building. By the time I got my classes registered, a lot of the classes were taken, so my classes were all over the place. It was chaotic. I couldn’t just block off mornings or afternoons, so I had class at 8 o’clock in the morning and I had one at 7 o’clock in the evening. They was just scattered about. That put me in a rough spot because of my job.

I had reservations about attending [Dabny State]. I had reservations the first day I registered because it was like—you would think that when you’re Black and when you register somebody the same—that looks like you—that they would understand. Like, “You know what? Let me make this path a little bit smoother for you.” But sometimes, for whatever reason, Black women aren’t like that.

I remember the initial meet was disheartening. I came into the admissions office and it was this lady sitting back. And it’s kinda like with Black people, if you’re not dressed a certain way, sometimes people don’t take you seriously. It’s kinda like where somebody White can go into [a nearby university] and be taken seriously, if I come in with a hat on and some jeans or something, 9 times out of 10 they’re not gonna take me seriously. So, I’m sitting in the admissions office, and this young guy comes in and he’s trying to get some information, and he didn’t know his student ID number. The lady was like, “Okay I don’t know it either.” So, I’m like, “You mean to tell me you don’t know

anybody that you can call to get this guy's student ID number to make sure he's able to get into class?" She was just like, "I need ya number." They weren't helpful at all. So, it was kinda like you have to get what you need yourself. You have to ask the right questions. If you don't ask the right questions, you'll be out of luck!

I was at somewhat of an advantage being an adult because being an adult and dealing with adults, sometimes you can be more assertive. Like had that been me asking for my student ID number, "So you mean to tell me you can't get on the computer and look for it?" So, I probably would've had to get an attitude to get some results, which is bad, and you shouldn't have to do that. I'm like, "How do these people in Atlanta handle their business here? How can they get through?" I can never get through. I've never been able to just call somebody, and then they just answer the phone. If I have, it may have been just one time. How can you check on what you need to check on in Atlanta when I gotta come from across town and stare somebody in the face?

I had to physically come up here because I couldn't get through on the phone! It's kinda like when I would call—I just for the life of me I don't understand how parents are off in Atlanta, and they're sending their children here, and they're having to communicate via phone or email because it's hard to get somebody to actually talk to you on the phone because what they'll do is they'll pass you off like, "Oh, you need to talk to so-and-so." And then they'll send you to so-and-so, and they may answer the phone. They may not answer the phone. So, you may get a voicemail or if you do talk to the person, they tell you to call somebody else until eventually you get a voicemail.

I didn't even get my acceptance letter until the day after registration. It just so happened that I came up here, and I was talking to somebody, and she was just like, "Oh

you can go ahead and register,” after like 3 hours of me just trying to figure out who do I need to talk to. And then I got the acceptance letter the next day. Then I was like I had already registered. Once I started taking classes, it was okay. It was just anything I needed in this administrative building was a headache!

Zoe

Before I graduated from [the local junior college], I went ahead and applied here. I filled out the application, and then people were emailing me back telling me the things that I needed, and so I just gave them everything that they needed. I had to transfer my transcripts over. That was a hassle because even though I went to [the local junior college] and I was able to transfer my transcripts to them online, when I got to the school it was like they didn't have them. They couldn't find it or something. It made me upset because I had to come up here several times! And then people were telling me different things. Like they act like they didn't know what was going on, like as far as my application and what I was supposed to do. So, it took several attempts before I could get everything straightened. Then my credits didn't all transfer, so my advisor didn't know where to place me when I went to get registered. They acted like they were clueless. It was just wild.

No one even told me who my advisor was, and the only reason I knew is because I went online 'cause at that point I was just frustrated 'cause online on their website it was telling us the deadline to turn in your packet for my program, and I was just trying to meet that. But it's just like I was stuck at admissions 'cause they weren't doing what they were supposed to. They were telling me I had to fill out a lot of stuff. I just took it upon myself to look up the director in the department, and I went to her, and I talked to

her. I had to look for myself because I didn't know about the campus because it's kinda big.

I didn't get registered the day I met her. I remember coming back because my grades wouldn't transfer. She didn't have my information. Nothing was in by the time I went to orientation. She didn't know where to place me that semester, so I had to come back. I had to submit another transcript because admissions act like they couldn't find my stuff. I submitted another one, but then I ended up printing an unofficial transcript to show her where I was, but it didn't indicate that in their records, so that's what took so long for me to get in, but I eventually got in.

Analysis

Johnson-Bailey (2001) concluded that institutional barriers were a major issue for the women in her study. These barriers included things like “inconvenient class schedules, remote campus locations, limited registration times, daytime office hours, unsympathetic and misinformed staff and faculty” (p. 94). The women in my study reported similar issues during their time at Dabny State University. They reported inconvenient class schedules that led some of them to quit their jobs because school and work schedules conflicted. Others worked overnight shifts so they could attend school during the day. Similarly, they encountered unhelpful faculty and staff who made their experience unduly challenging.

It is clear from the women's experiences that they encountered unhelpful staff along the way, which became a barrier that they had to negotiate, specifically when it came to their admission to the university. Attending school was important enough for them that they found a way to successfully overcome the barriers, a testament to their

tenacity. In order to get what they needed from the unhelpful staff, the women used assertiveness and continued follow-up until they were successful. Johnson-Bailey (2001) pointed out that tenacity “is one factor that sets reentry women students apart from younger women students” (p. 21). One can only imagine the negative impact on a university’s future and continued enrollment when potential and existing students have to work against so many institutional barriers.

Interrole Conflict

All of the women in my study can be classified as “reentry” students, which Thomas (2001) defined as “women who had not completed higher education at the traditional age but later returned to school while simultaneously maintaining other responsibilities, such as full-time employment, family commitments, and other obligations of adult life” (p. 139). All of the women in my study attempted college immediately after graduating from high school but stopped out for various reasons and reentered later, and for several, after they had started a family, begun a career, or become financially independent. As a result, not only were these women college students, but they were fulfilling the role of mother, wife, or employee as well. The duality of these roles was particularly challenging for these women as they attempted to balance and blend these roles.

For three of the reentry women, school and work intersected so much that they had to give one up because of the inflexibility of their schedules at both school and work. All three of those women chose to give up working to reenter college. This was a major risk for all of them, but particularly for Debbie who felt like she risked her career in hopes of earning a degree and either reentering her career or beginning a new one.

Amber and Shontae took a risk and gave up the financial security that their jobs provided because their work schedule was a barrier to their attending school, but they did not feel the loss of a career as Debbie had. While each of the women continued fulfilling other roles aside from student, the burden of being a worker subsided as they made being a student their full-time job.

Amber

Amber volunteers at the school but has been looking for a job in her field that will not interfere with her schooling. Previously, she worked in the fast-food industry, but had to leave that job when it conflicted with her school schedule.

Right now, I'm just volunteering, but I am trying to find a job in my field. I don't want any fast-food jobs. I had one fast-food job, and it was just too stressful because they act like I didn't have to go to school so I didn't like that. Even though my grades didn't suffer 'cause I came out with a 4.0, still it got to me because even my friends and family was noticing it. My parents was like, "You repeating yourself." Then I was like, "Wait a minute, what'd you just say?" I said, "I thought you just said . . ." They was like, "No." So, it got to where I was concerned about that.

I came, and I said, "Can I just work like 2 days a week?" That's all I asked. They started out doing that when I changed my schedule and then started working me like 4 to 5 days. And it was night shift. And then I had one manager that was like, "Okay we close at 10, let's be out of here at 10:30." So that was great. Then I had one manager who acted like we was supposed to spend the night there. I'm like, "You finding little bitty stuff that we didn't do. We got to go home." And I'm not like the other folks, they got kids. They got more than me! I'm just in college, but I say, "Other folks, they got

kids and families, so they have to leave, and you just sitting there finding little bitty stuff.” And so, I had to let it go. I’m like, I can’t be working like this ‘cause it’s affecting me even though I pass with flying colors. That’s the main thing. I don’t like when I can’t process the information. I don’t wanna have to rush through a test.

School is my top priority, so I will accommodate school before work. It’s important. Like I say, a bachelor’s degree cannot earn itself. That’s top priority. Of course, I have to work and everything, but that’s what I’m trying to find now. You have to apply for jobs soon, so I’m trying to start now ‘cause I know the first 3 years I was so busy. So, I just left off work for the time and work study was perfect. It was really good, especially in the spring, and I was working in an ideal place in the office. Everybody was really nice and stuff. I ain’t have no stress, so that was very great. It was nice.

Kayla

I didn’t go to orientation, but I still paid for it. You know if you don’t go to orientation, you still gotta pay for it. I didn’t go because it was on a Saturday. I work. I couldn’t make it. When I first got in the program, they warned me about working. They told me to quit my job, which I’m not doing. No. I couldn’t choose between school and work. I don’t have a choice. Right now, I don’t have a choice.

I couldn’t give up my job. If I had to give up my independence, I would stop going to school. I am not going to live with my mother and father. If I had to give up working, I don’t know what I’d do. I’d probably stop going to school. School is very important to me. I have to go to school. I can’t work only Monday and Wednesday and Friday. I can’t do that. I work overnights because I really have to. I’m really sacrificing. I can’t get an amazing job. I have to sit with older people because that’s all I can do at

this point. I have to work on weekends when everybody else is home. I have to. It's the choice that I have to make.

I didn't have to go to school, but I like money. And where I want to go and where I want to be in life, I have to have a degree, so I just have to suck it up. There are days that I don't want to go to work. There's days that I don't want to go to school, but I have to do both. It's just not an option for me. At this point in my life, it's not an option. I'm gonna have to pay this rent. I'm gonna have to pay this car note. You gotta suck it up. I have about 2 or 3 minutes to wallow in it and then I have to snap back to my reality. My reality is, "You chose to go back to school and you got a brand-new car. You chose to go back to school, and you got this townhouse. You gotta pay for it." So, I just suck it up! It's not easy though.

As far as work and school, my school schedule fit okay. On my first day I had like three classes, but on Tuesday and Thursday, I had to come 45 minutes for that one class 'cause it wasn't a time that I could take something else. The person that registered me, I guess they didn't know that I could take the class with another class that I took on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but I drove all the way for one class—45 minutes! It was horrible. I hated it.

I had group assignments, so what I did was the day that I had to come to school for 45 minutes, I would stay and do the group assignments like that. And then when I couldn't stay, my classmates would send me stuff in group messages, and I'd do my part. Then the next time, we would set up a date to meet and then we'd all go over it. And on a Friday or Saturday or something, I'd have to drive back over there to do my part. This didn't work out so well for me, but I had to get my grades, so I had to do it. I don't have

the time like they do, you know what I'm saying? Everybody in my class lives on campus or near campus. They're children. Well, not children, but they're like in their young adult lives so they have time to go to the library or the lab or something like that, and I didn't.

I work on the weekends, so normally I'm gonna work on a Sunday night from 7 p to 7 a. So, at 7 am in the morning, I'm coming from [a small nearby town] because that's where my client lives. So, it depends on what kind of night she's had 'cause if she's had a horrible night, I've had a horrible night. No sleep whatsoever. So just say on a good night, she slept all night. I get up, drive home, get ready, get all my clothes. Sometimes I was late, but my professors wasn't mean or nothing about it. They knew I had worked. They knew me, so whenever I got there they wasn't rude or anything. My classes last from 10:15 to 6:15. There was no break. Just back to back to back to back. And you have no choice about those classes. You got to take those classes 'cause whatever quadrant you in is the classes you have to take so you had to take all those classes. So, a lot of times I worked all night and came straight to school and never slept. I'll crash when I come home, but I still feel like I gotta get it all done. If I get all my work done, then I can go to sleep because I don't have anything to do. So, I would come home and do my school work.

I still have a boyfriend. I had to put all that into it. He talking about he hungry, got to wash clothes, got to try to keep a decent house. I still have family. My family still needs me. My parents will want things from me. People feel like I went away, but I didn't go away. I'm sleep. Literally even now, I work so much, and I'm fixing to get ready to go back to school when the semester starts. They're like, "You're never around.

We have family functions, and you're never there. We call you, and you don't even answer the phone." It's not that I don't want to. I don't have time to answer the phone!

Anytime somebody rings my doorbell, they want something. Anytime somebody calls my phone, they don't just check up on me. They want something. So, I'm just gonna avoid it all! I'm that type of person. I really can't say no. I know that I'll have an assignment, and I gotta stay up all night, but you want me to go take you somewhere and you stay in Walmart for 3 hours. I got an assignment to do. I can't take you to Walmart!

My twin sister doesn't drive, and so everywhere she goes, I have to take her. And everywhere her daughter goes, I have to take her. So, it's like I don't have time. I ain't trying to be mean, but I don't have time for that. And my poor little friends, they said, "We'll see you in '18 [when Kayla expects to graduate]." I don't go to Applebee's, I don't go to their functions. When they get girls' trips, I can't go! I just can't! So, everybody feels like right now, "Oh you just vanished."

Shontae

I had to register right before school starts. I was off work, and I came out for the last orientation and did it all in the course of one day. I think I got here about 8 or 9 and didn't leave until like 4. Getting registered that late, you just get bread crumbs, so I just had a scattered out schedule. Most people say, "I want classes in the morning," or "I want classes in the afternoon." You know, whatever on this day or that day. But I didn't have a choice. Whatever they had, I had to take, so that threw me. I'm like in a bind as far as my job because it's like, "How will I be able to actually get to class, parent, and work?"

I had an 8 o'clock class that semester and I'm not an early bird, so that was torture! Just trying to get up, get everybody situated, get everybody where they need to go, and then make it to class at 8 o'clock. Then I had another class at 1 and then one at 7 in the evening. But the next semester it was easier for me because I said to my advisor, "I want all my classes in the morning." I could make sure I'm gonna figure that thing out.

We had a lot of group assignments and that was hard because it kinda take the other women a long time, and I don't have that kinda time 'cause I still got some children I gotta raise, you know? I don't have the liberty of sitting at home all day just doing group work 'cause I still got three children to raise and I have a life. I gotta have something outside of this school work and these kids.

My classes started at 9 am. I wake up twice in the mornings. One time, I have to wake up to make sure the kids get on the bus then I can go back to sleep. They get on the bus at 6:45 in the morning. They go to school across town from where we live so they ride the bus because sometimes when I take them, it takes so long. If I had to take them to school, then I would have to already be dressed to make it to my 9 o'clock class. I won't have time to go back home and get dressed so I'm like, "Y'all gotta ride the bus" unless it was like really cold or raining, something like that.

So, once I get up for myself, I jump in the shower, throw on clothes—even though I don't have them out, in my mind I already know what I'm gonna wear. Then I'm gonna either try to grab a latte or get a full breakfast from a restaurant because I hate cooking. I'm always pushing it to get to class on time because you can't come to my first professor's class late. So, I know whatever I'm doing, I gotta get there. And her

assignments, once you get there you have to hand them to her 'cause if not, then she's not accepting them. So, I'll pull up to the school while I'm riding down the road eating breakfast. Then I'll walk up, and I'll see her sitting in the office, then I can sigh. I keep telling myself, "Okay I'm gonna get up earlier tomorrow." But next time, I don't.

Depending on what day of the week it is, I am coming home fussing because by 4:30, they get off the bus and somebody wanna take their time. I got stuff to do. Somebody got baseball practice, somebody got karate practice, I gotta pick my oldest daughter up from school, so I don't have a lot of time for them to kinda just be like, "I don't know where my cleats at, Mama." But, we're running. What I try to do is, since I hate cooking, I try to cook and it last for 2 days. And if for some reason my classes ran over, then my mom would come and cook or do whatever, take them somewhere. I love it when she comes and cooks. Then we're getting home somewhere about 8 o'clock. We probably wind down about 9:30.

If I got homework, I do it at night after all that because everything is going on in the daytime. For whatever reason, I have never been really able to just do school work in the daytime. If I do schoolwork, I can't do it at home. I have to just leave. I don't know why, I mean I just start watching TV. I'll have a paper due, and I feel like I need to clean out the closet. I'll start out, "Let me throw something in the washing machine." Next thing I know, I'm cleaning out the wash room. It's like, "Nuh uh." I just can't do things in the daytime. But at night it's silent, and I can flow without any interruptions because in the daytime, my mom's gonna call. She gonna wanna talk. My daddy gonna call, wanna talk. Somebody else gonna call. Telemarketers gonna call. So, it's a lot of distractions in the daytime, but at night I can just kinda flow.

I can't say that there won't be any interruptions in the daytime because I gotta keep my phone near me. I'm scared if I sit down, the school gonna call, something gonna happen, I'm gonna miss a call. And I don't know why, but my mom calls me like 3 million times a day. The conversation is pointless, seriously! But if I don't answer the phone that just means she's gonna call back again and call back again. And then when I finally answer, "Hey! What's going on? What's up? Why didn't you answer the phone?" "I was busy! What do you want, mama?" So yeah, it's just quiet and it's easier to just do that at night. And I feel like I think better at night.

I had to skip one summer, and it felt like I wasn't doing anything! The kids were home and that's a job, but I wanted to be in school because it made me feel productive. I did nothing in the summer. Most people got a job or something. Every semester it was like, "Ugh, I need to get a job." But by the time I got a job, school rolling around and then it's hard when you trying to work. If you haven't established a job and then you're trying to work, raise kids, and go to school, eventually there's going to be conflict. Eventually it's gonna happen. Eventually somebody's going to be sick and if I already can't work on Monday and Wednesday and my child gets sick on Tuesday and I'm supposed to work all day, then it's gonna be an issue.

They told us when we got into the program that we can't have a job. I had already quit mine, but I was just like—when I think about things, I don't just think about them for me, I think about it for other people. I was thinking, "Okay, maybe at some point I could get a part-time job." Generally, the classes are either Monday or Wednesday. You'll take Monday or Wednesday classes throughout until you graduate. So, I'm thinking, "I can work Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and the weekend." But by

the time you get to that, you're kinda drained, especially if you got kids. So, I understand when they say just point blank, "Don't work." You can't work. But if you have bills, you kinda have to balance that. And even just trying to do the social work program part time is kinda unrealistic. People have actually tried to do it. I can't even say if any are successful.

If I did have a job, I'd would've had to probably change up my schedule because this semester it may start in the morning. The next semester it may start around noon and last until the evening. So just trying to do that part-time and you just have a regular 9 to 5, you may have to wait until the following semester to even do the other two classes. I already had to work my job as a mom around school. My parents helped a lot. My mom, she gets off around 1:30. My dad, he's self-employed so he moves around freely. So, they were able to get them home, feed them, take them to a practice, whatever it was. But it was only 2 days a week they actually had to do that because I was free Tuesday, Thursday, Friday. But they would primarily just kinda help out. And then, my ex-husband, if his schedule kinda went along with what I was doing—and then also, even though he's a cop and he can move around, it's no guarantee because I may need you at the house at 4 o'clock when they get off the bus and you may get a call.

It is really hard to be a parent in the social work program. In that department, you have no life other than school. It's set up for traditional students, but the majority of the students in the program are nontraditional. They don't get a whole lot of traditional, and it was frustrating to a lot of people because life happens. Life happens to everybody—well other than the people in the social work department. If life happens to you, it's kinda like, roll with it. You have to make your life happen around social work.

This is no lie—two girls—one girl was pregnant. I didn't know anything about this. This is just something my professor said. In the social work department, being pregnant is kinda like an option, like you chose to be pregnant. So, they feel like if you knew you were pregnant when the semester started, you should've dropped or whatever the case may be. They're not making no exceptions. You just gotta roll with it. They don't care. She said one girl had a miscarriage. She was in the building and they took her to the emergency room and she end up having a miscarriage. So that was the story that was told.

But even in those instances, they're not making any special accommodations for you. If you miss class, you can only miss the amount of days that it said in your syllabus and there's no makeup. Like you can't just go back and make up anything. If you miss the test, you just miss the test. Even if you go have your baby, you better come back to class. They don't give you any leeway. They was like, "If you pregnant, you need to withdraw, and you need to just start next semester."

To a certain degree, I can understand. If you're pregnant, we're not gonna make any provisions for you because sometimes people abuse that. You know, "Oh, I'm having morning sickness." But I think the human side of it and with social work meeting people where they are, it's kinda like okay, you see that there's a classroom full of nontraditional students and the human aspect of it, like once she starts to deliver a human, a person, some accommodations should be made, especially if you see them coming to class every single day. You know their work ethic because you've had them throughout the program. You know what kinda person she is because she's been in the program.

And it's been sometimes when people actually sat out and just waited until the next semester after they've had their child to just go ahead and finish up.

Zoe

Before I got my job I have now, I worked full-time at the hospital during the week and on the weekends. I would come up here and handle business on off days. That's what I did when I came up on here on orientation day. I was working then, but it was an off day. I didn't actually go to the orientation 'cause I thought it was for younger people and I don't have time for that. I did go to it, but then I took it upon myself—'cause it was like two sessions and I only went to the first one 'cause I wasn't about to go to the second one because I was tired and had just gotten off work.

Now, I have another job working at a group home for children. I got the job because it's related to what I'm going to school for and I wanted to gain experience. I get 40 hours a week working there. It's hectic because I got school Monday through Thursday and then I go to work Thursday through Sunday. On Thursdays and Fridays, I work 3 to 11 and then on Saturdays and Sundays I work 12p to 11p. I'm at work or school 7 days a week. My life has always been like that though.

I've never had a social life because I was going to school and it's like I was trying to play catch up because I didn't go back to school until I was 25. Sometimes I wish I had a social life. I feel like I don't know how to connect with people and just have a relationship. That's because of my situation. I have to support myself, so I have to still work. But I'm still working on a degree, so I have to focus on that too, so I don't have time. Like I've never had time. So, in order to really focus on my school work, that

meant I had to sacrifice my weekends. And most people don't wanna work on the weekends, so I was able to work on the weekends versus just working during the week.

In my program, we don't really get to pick when our classes are. They make our schedules for us, so we have to work around their schedule. That was hard for me 'cause I was working at the hospital, and I had to basically work on the weekends 'cause I worked 12 hour shifts, 7 a to 7 p and there were times that I'd get off Monday morning at 7 am and then I had class at like 10. I was tired. I didn't sleep. I just stayed up. One semester, work did get in the way of my school and my work did suffer. That's when I first started at the group home. It had suffered where I had started doing bad that whole semester. It was bad.

Sometimes if I had school work to do, I'd call out to work or whatever I needed to do. If I had worked all night and then had to stay after school to work on something else, I just got a second wind. I'd knock it out. Run off adrenaline. My focus is not so much on being tired. I just focus on, "This has to be done. I need to get this done." That's when the adrenaline kicks in. Sometimes I'd stay up at the school until 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning working on assignments because that was really the only time I could really work on it. I didn't work on it at home because it's like I was so busy, consumed with so much work. I don't know, papers was never ending. And then I was still trying to catch up on my sleep because between going to school full-time and working full-time, that's hard. That's really hard. And I was trying to balance my sleep, work, school, and then assignments.

Analysis

Interrole conflict is a common theme in the literature on Black reentry women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; Thomas (2001). Johnson-Bailey (2001) described the experience of being a reentry woman as:

Life with little rest. Many reentry women state that they realized that school would be a new experience that would require a reshuffling of their schedules. Many women who return to school overwhelmingly lament that school has become an additional obligation that has been piled on to other family and personal obligations. (p. 82)

Several of the women in the study noted the difficulty of working around rigid schedules at the HBCU because they had competing obligations at home or at work. Johnson-Bailey (2001) pointed out this very issue in her study:

Reentry women find that although their numbers are increasing in the university and college communities, the environment is not adapting to them, but instead expects them to change their lives to fit the traditional college format. Routinely they face trying to reschedule their “real” lives of work, children, and family obligations, in order to register for classes, meet with professors, or attend special events on campus during the day. (p. 52)

The women in Johnson-Bailey’s (2001) study sometimes shuffled their work schedules to be at the school for things that only took place in the daytime. Similarly, the women in my study sometimes called out to work or shuffled their work schedules so they could do group work with traditional-aged students, attending registration or

orientation, or get assignments complete before deadlines, especially if they needed support from a staffed lab.

Sometimes shuffling around a work and school schedule is not possible and women have to choose one or the other, particularly when those schedules are rigid and inflexible. Being forced to choose between school and a job would likely be a barrier for most adult women, particularly those whose income is critical to the family's subsistence. Because her school schedule was "all over the place" and her manager at work was unwilling to change her schedule, Shontae was forced to choose between her job and attending school. This was a difficult decision for the single mother of three, but she took the risk of quitting her job to pursue her degree after her parents agreed to assist her financially.

Finding their Place within the Campus Culture

From my experience attending and working at different postsecondary institutions, each college campus has its own unique culture and students usually find a way to fit in somehow or they adjust to being situated outside of it. From my personal experience working at the HBCU, the most satisfied students are those who have adapted to and become a part of the campus culture. The HBCU is a youth-oriented environment where Greek life and athletic events flourish. Tinto (1993) said that older women are more likely than younger students to feel isolated in universities, and that makes it hard for them to persist to graduation.

For the most part, the women in my study resisted deeply entrenching themselves into the culture of the university, but they did manage to carve out a niche for themselves within the existing campus culture at the HBCU. As I read their transcripts and coded the

data, I found that the *a priori* categories of helping each other and mentoring/maternal roles were fitting categories. I inductively generated the category of comfort level on campus, which effectively captured how the women see themselves fitting in on campus. Together, these three categories formed the larger theme of finding their place within the campus culture.

Helping Each Other

One way that nontraditional women maneuver themselves into the campus culture is by gravitating to others like them and providing a support system to each other (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The women in my study did the same thing, although that did not always translate into a positive or productive experience in the end. Sometimes the women networked with other nontraditional students and other times it was with other students in the program because they had that in common. Either way, the women gravitated toward those students with whom they had something in common.

Amber

I met my first friend my first semester. Her name was Bridget and she was the same age as me. That was something else! She was a senior, so that was her last semester. She was the bestest friend ever. We made the best of that semester. We went to everything together—probates, games, and the Fountain City Classic. That was really unique meeting somebody that's the same age as me. Another nontraditional student. That helped me out. Over the years, I see a few other students, older students, who are my age or older in the classroom. They're nontraditional students as well, so we relate on a different level. We can talk to each other. It's different.

Debbie

My classmates eventually started calling me a perfectionist. In the beginning, I thought our relationship was good because we only had six people in my quadrant and we started helping each other, but as time went on my classmates became—you know, they were younger, so I wouldn't expect them to be where I am in mindset. But they started wanting to take shortcuts, didn't want to study. I'm the type of person, I wanna make up a study guide for everything that I do. I found myself giving them study guides, but then they didn't wanna help find the questions and then I got frustrated. And then as you go up, you're working as a group and you need everybody to participate and then I felt overwhelmed because the majority of the work fell on me. When we did group work, they was not interested in starting early like I was. They kept saying they had other things to do and later I found out that that's what was said, "Mrs. Richards gonna carry us. She ain't gonna let it fall. We gonna go on and do this." I was very upset, but my work turned out pretty good anyway.

I had a couple study groups at my house and that was the time when I said I would make up study guides. I had asked the students to kinda help look for the answers and then we could go over them and see do we agree with them or whatever, but that never happened. I only did that twice, and I refused to do it again, so I kinda kept to myself after then. But there's still people that I reached out to try to help, but I just didn't reach out to the whole group. First of all, it's taxing on me, taking up time. See, I'm a typer. I don't like to write, so I type up my notes, everything. I scribble through the day, but when I go home I type up my notes. It helps me to remember better. It takes time, and I feel like if I take my time and I'm just giving it to you? Nah. I stopped. I stopped!

And matter of fact, I was counseled to stop by one of my teachers. I had a bad semester, and she saw the things that I was doing, and she actually told me that wasn't good, that I needed to let everybody carry themselves and stop. I was helping the others because that's just my nature. That's the type person that I am. And I like educating—I mean as far as I worked in a school and I watched what the teachers would do. That's how I learned to do study guides because I watched what they would do, and I just internalized it, and I brought it into this arena and just worked with it.

Shontae

It helped being in a room with people who were in my similar situation because once the professors left, we could talk about them like, “What do they want?” Everybody in the room could relate. Everybody knew that they just kinda had to figure the assignment out before they left campus. We would just kinda take it one assignment at a time. Like, I can't work on this and then something else. Like, “Okay, what's due next week?” Okay, so I can't focus on what's due the week after. I gotta focus on what's due right now and get an understanding because when I leave, that's when I'm really gonna get started. And I'm a nighthawk so I do a lot of stuff and any questions I have, I need to ask before I actually leave because once I get in the car and drive, my mind goes, “Okay, what I gotta do when I get home?” And it's not gonna start thinking about school until everybody's asleep.

But everybody was helpful because we all had each other's phone numbers and a lot of times, we would just kinda communicate even after we left just to say, “Okay I read this and I don't understand that,” or “What you think she means by this?” or “When she said that, what did you write down?” That network is something I only had when I got

into the program. In the core classes, you kinda meet people and connect with them, but that's just for that semester. You may never see them again. You may see them just on campus, but it was just for that specific class as opposed to in the program, we're gonna be together until—we're gonna walk across that stage together. At the beginning, we really helped each other. It was like, "Oh, we're a team! We'll get through this together!" By the end, it's like, "Let me graduate. Let me get out of here."

Analysis

Debbie seems to find intrinsic value in helping others. This helping spirit pervades Debbie's story. After raising her children and supporting her husband throughout his career, she eventually decided to focus on herself and return to school, but even there her selflessness and generosity were evident. She brought extra materials with her to class in case her younger classmates were unprepared or did not have the means to purchase their own. She also helped her classmates learn the material and prepare for exams by sharing her notes, forming study groups, and creating study guides for exams. As Debbie's experiences indicate, helping each other can sometimes turn into one person feeling as though the others are taking advantage of her help.

Mentoring/Maternal Relationship

It is not surprising for the nontraditional women in my study to assume a maternal role with their traditional counterparts. The literature on these women shows that the maternal role is a common phenomenon among these women because they are often mothers themselves and may have children of similar age to their younger classmates (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007a, 2013). After reading about the maternal role in existing literature, I knew this would be an appropriate *a priori* category for some of

the women in my study, namely Debbie and Kayla. Amber, on the other hand, seemed to reveal more of a mentorship with her younger classmates. Because it was similar enough to the maternal roles of Debbie and Kayla, I decided to combine these two categories together into one.

Amber

By me being older, I helped out some of the younger ones that came in. Sometimes they were annoying and then sometimes it was alright 'cause once they find out how old I was, I got a little respect. It make them think a little bit and look at themselves 'cause like, "Okay here's somebody who done been there, done that." They would ask questions and everything. I was asked questions like, "What's life gonna be like after college?" I said, "Look, this my first time at a university." "Is it really?" I said, "Yeah. I had a hard life. Life is hard. Folks may have told you that life is not scripted. Folks think you're supposed to graduate and move out your parents' house. I'm still with my parents. I still stay with my parents." Folks thinks I have my own place. I said, "That's where you mess up at. I'm glad my parents told me that having your own place don't make you grown." So, they said, "Oh!"

So, I said, "I know your parents probably have told you, but they messed you up. I can tell you that things make you grown. You see people that have they own place, they so childish. I know some people that have houses and they childish. Life grows you up. Life is hard. If you go through life thinking that, 'Oh, everybody loves me,' or 'I'm not gonna run into no rocks and hard places and stuff,' you not gonna be ready. You gotta be ready for the inevitable. That's the thing. When you leave here, that's the main thing. Get your education, please." I said, "I ain't have no trouble getting my education 'cause

my parents instilled it in me. The problem with y'all is the fact that I'm older." My generation, we're a little more stable-minded. We got our lesson and no trouble. We dedicated to whatever we do, and we listen. The ones that came after my generation, parents spoiled them, bought them everything and they didn't instill in them to get your lesson. They didn't instill in them to get they lesson and to stand up for themselves and not just to run every time something bad happens. Stand there and fight. They don't fight for themselves.

As far as class goes, when there's a mixture of nontraditional and traditional students, it be a good class. They look at how we respond to things. They may not pay attention, but some of them are like, "Wow, my parents didn't tell me that." And they know it's different because most of our parents grew up in the civil rights era. Those are the parents that fought in that era and they know about discipline, and they know what it takes to make it. My parents instilled in me to keep your head up and don't take anything, especially education, for granted. And wherever you go, don't look down on the college. You don't want nobody to look down on you. I said, "Good point." So, they instilled in me and not only me, but the rest of us in my generation, to respect each other. We gotta respect 'cause we got our butt whooped regardless. But they was instilling in us discipline and to be respectful and to honor other people and it will come back to you.

Debbie

I got teased a lot by younger students because I was usually the one with the pencil, the paper, the scantrons, and everything. And I did, I supplied a lot of stuff

because I just felt like, okay, maybe they don't have it or whatever, so I always have an abundance of everything.

Kayla

I was like the mother. It was like, [whispering] "Don't curse in front of her, you know she's 34," or "Shh, don't say that." They were talking about their sex life, and I walked in and they were like, "Shh, she's right there." That type of thing. But another thing I can tell you, I did feel like the mother because I would remind people when our homework was due or when tests were coming. I was like, "Guys, you know we have a test on Friday," or "You know our research paper is due next Wednesday," or if they didn't have a pencil, I had a pencil. Things of that nature.

But it was like they were my children and once they found out how old I was, as time progressed they'd come to me about boyfriend issues. It's like I'm the mother of the class, and they literally said that out loud. Like, "Oh, that's Mama Kayla" or something like that. I was fine with that role, but I just really wanna learn. But I've always been the type of person to help people and listen to people problems.

On a lot of group assignments, I think my teachers put me with the really immature children—not children, but the ones who ain't quite mature. I can see my teachers like, "Okay, you go over with them so you can—'cause we know this answer won't be this if you go over there." They see, you know? And I've had teachers, "Oh, they slacking off," and stuff like that. "Maybe since they look up to you, you can talk to them. They not doing homework like they supposed to. Since they confide in you about stuff, maybe you should say something instead of us saying something because they'll respect it more from you than they will from us."

Even outside of class I tried to help my younger classmates. Sometimes at lunch we would go to the Wendy's that's right down the road 'cause they have the 4 for \$4 deal. They don't have money, so a bunch of times I paid for it. And if we stayed late to work on assignments, I'll drive them all back to their dorms 'cause I don't think they should be walking at night.

Analysis

The mentoring and maternal roles that these women assumed with their classmates is telling of how much of their inseparable identity comes with them to the classroom. The ways these women fulfilled these roles manifested in different ways. Amber offered advice and life lessons to her classmates in the form of wisdom gained from enduring her hardships. Debbie, who was perhaps more financially stable than the younger students, selflessly provided them with school supplies. Kayla's classmates solicited advice from her on love and relationships.

Comfort Level on Campus

Fitting into a large campus community can be difficult for any student (Stone & Schwab-Stone, 2016), but as the stories the women in the present study show, fitting in can be especially challenging for nontraditional women. Feelings of discomfort can have a negative impact on student progression and retention. In writing about the importance of cultural safe spaces for students of color at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Pittman (1994) noted that “[t]here is a strong relationship between levels of campus comfort and retaining students of color” (para. 9).

The original inspiration behind my study came from conversations that I had with Debbie about her experiences at the youth-oriented HBCU, which included feelings of

discomfort because of her age and her seemingly incomparable serious attitude toward her education. As she and others describe in this section, feelings of discomfort and sticking out began immediately and only subsided when and if the women were able to form relationships with others.

Amber

I'm a [University] Ambassador. We give tours, so we gotta know the campus really well, like every nook and cranny. We gotta know it all. I been wanting to do this since my senior year in high school 'cause that's when we came for my first campus visitation day and that's who did the tours. They are very, very, very nice and they're distinguished. I said, "I would like to join that!" They was really, really friendly, and they treated me like I was already a student. I really liked it. I had been in love with [the HBCU], and so I was like I would like to do that too.

So, one day when I was working in admissions doing work study, the president of the organization came in and I asked him, "If I wanted to become a [University] Ambassador, what would I have to do?" He said, "Well, you can come talk to me." He told me about the upcoming interest meeting. I ain't even know he was the president! I knew he was an ambassador, but I ain't know he was the president at the time! So, I went to the interest meeting and he said there that he was the president. I said, "This whole time I was talking to the president!" He was very welcoming.

I enjoy recruiting people and telling them about our university. It's also great leadership skills. I look at it as when you in an organization, I pay attention to leadership. Leadership reflect a lot of things. The leader has to be a real good leader, pristine. He's that. He's a 10. He leads really well, and he's strict. That's how you're supposed to be.

He's very great. The generation that he's in, a lot of them not friendly. A lot of them don't know how to lead. A lot of them don't want to lead and don't know how to treat people. But him, he resonates with the ones that I saw during campus visitation days and that was like 10 years ago. And I was looking at it like, you couldn't tell the difference between him and the others because he rare coming out of his generation. He's something else. I wish we had more of him.

There's another girl who is an ambassador, and she's really nice. I pay attention to people's personalities, how they act. There aren't any other nontraditional students in the group though, but I feel welcome. All of them are pretty good, but some of them have they days! I do like how they all carry themselves. They carry themselves well. They pretty friendly. They don't walk around like they don't know you. Walking around campus, of course when we busy, we might not see each other. No harm not speaking 'cause we might have our mind on a million things 'cause sometimes somebody walk right past you. You have your mind on a lot of stuff, and you can't think straight. But other than that, we speak to each other. It's no trouble.

Debbie

When we went to orientation, we didn't go when the traditional kids went. We went after they went. Think about it, you excited! You going to a university! They gave out a little bookbag, but my t-shirt was too big. I had a 2X shirt! I gave them which size I wore! Unfortunately, they had given all the smaller sizes out to the freshmen that came in. I didn't like that part. I paid you for this and now I have to sleep in this shirt that they gave me. Since they had a set time for us to come and they asked us what size shirt, we shouldn't have had to take whatever was left. That's all they could do for me. That's

disheartening coming in as a nontraditional student because you're trying to fit in anyway.

My relationship with my classmates changed over the course of the program. In the beginning, our relationship was good because we only had six people in the quadrant and we started out helping each other a lot, but as time went on my classmates became—they were younger, so I wouldn't expect them to be where I am in mindset. But they started wanting to take shortcuts, didn't want to study. I'm the type person I want to make up a study guide for everything that I do. I found myself giving them my study guides, but then they didn't wanna help find the questions and then I got frustrated. And then as you go up, you're working as a group and you need everybody to participate and then I felt overwhelmed because the majority of the work fell on me.

In the beginning of the program, sometimes I would hang out with a couple students in class. Toward the end, I was all by myself. I wasn't hanging out with anyone. When I received the scholarship for my achievements, I called my classmates on the phone and told them. Their whole attitude changed and that was very strange for me. Being a nontraditional student and you know, everybody wants to feel good about their accomplishments, but I felt like I had to keep my accomplishments under wraps because it caused me more problems than it did good. It's like it caused a rift between the students, my colleagues, and I couldn't understand why. It didn't seem they were happy for me. It's just like it put more pressure on me because they refused to do anything.

I didn't really attend a whole lot of activities on campus. Toward the end, we had a new teacher to come in and so she started organizing a lot of club activities, and I went to a few and it was pretty good. She did a fashion show once, we had a cookout, and you

just get the same people. Everybody won't come together to help out and you just get the same people, so another nontraditional student and I, we constantly was always the only ones that's left behind doing stuff. That's just because that's who we are. The younger people, they just didn't appreciate it as far as I could see.

Shaquita

I do not get into any of the student life activities on campus. I don't like people. I do not like people! So, it's like on my free time, I don't wanna have to be involved with you people. And it's like when I hit the department with that, "I really don't like you people," they're like "No, you love us!" And I'm like, "No, you guys, really no. Trust me here. No." I'm not playing. I don't club. I don't party. I feel old now. I don't wanna be in groups of people that are 20 or 21 because now our mindsets are different. Honestly, I'm the oldest in my department. If I have to follow a 21-year-old, I'm just not. I do take the lead a lot of times because I look at it like everybody needs a big sister. And in the department, we are a big family. But I do take the lead a lot of times because they're young. They're young and they're drama-filled. They love that stuff.

Shontae

When I went to school on the first day, it was a lot of younger people in the morning classes, and it was older people in the evening classes. It seemed like it was more older people in the evening classes. I was just kinda trying to find my gist or whatever just because I'm new to this as far as being in the room with a mixture of people. Before when I went to school, I don't recall it being older people in class. When I got into my program, I was more comfortable because the majority of the people in that program are nontraditional. The majority of the students are nontraditional, but it's not

set up for nontraditional students. I had a pretty good relationship with my classmates in the program at first. When we had breaks, we may sit around and talk, or we may go get something to eat.

Zoe

I didn't know anything about the school when I got here, and I still don't know anything. I just stay in my little place. I haven't ventured out of my space where my program is. When I first got to the school, I felt culture shock. It's 'cause it was different from [the local junior college], and it was just a lot of people. The buildings too, it was just way bigger. I just felt like I could get lost. I just wanted to stay in one place at all times. One place. And then I couldn't understand the scheduling 'cause it was different. I was so accustomed to [the local junior college]. Everything was just different.

It was a lot of younger students in my core classes. I couldn't relate to them, so I couldn't form relationships with them, study with them, talk to them, none of that. I kept to myself, and I was fine with that 'cause I was focused and I knew that they weren't focused. Also, they were younger, so they have other stuff on their minds.

When I got in my quadrant, it was mostly older women except for like two who were 19 or 20, something like that. We took all our major classes together and I liked that. I'm used to them. I know them. I been with them 2 years now. In the first couple of semesters, we didn't know each other like that. We were more quiet but when we had to start doing presentations and when we had to start engaging in group activities, that's when we actually came together. It's like it just went from being formal to being informal and then we talked about other things other than school. We started talking about our families and stuff. We have a close relationship. We talk about personal stuff.

My favorite thing about attending school here is the people in my quadrant. I appreciate it just being us. I appreciate our relationship and the support group that we have. We are all a support. We support one another. I made friends with the people in my quadrant. We go out to eat, celebrate birthdays, and stuff. We are very close.

Analysis

More than any other woman in my study, Amber seemed to be the most comfortable and happy on campus, but she is also the one who has most assimilated to the youth-oriented programs and activities on campus and embraced the college life. Amber is a member of the much-revered University Ambassadors, which is a selective organization of students that is involved in campus tours, open house, orientation, and the week of welcome. On the other hand, the most comfort that Debbie, Shaquita, Shontae, and Zoe felt came when they were with their peers in their programs, who were often nontraditional students as well.

Moreover, the other women did not necessarily seem interested in joining campus programs or getting involved in campus life, which may be on account of the traditional student orientation of the activities. From my experience, the traditional students on campus seem to really enjoy the programs and activities that take place throughout the school year. These activities begin at freshman orientation and continue all the way through a student's matriculation. The women in this study seem less concerned with having fun and more preoccupied with learning what is required for their program of study. As Johnson-Bailey (2001) found with one of her participants, "Like so many reentry women, she is in school with a single goal in mind and doesn't expect it to be fun." (p. 71)

The Women as Students

The literature on adult learners and their behaviors as students is plentiful (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Markle, 2015; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Thomas, 2001). As I was collecting and analyzing data about these women, I found that that the way they fulfilled their roles as students varied from woman to woman. While they do exhibit some characteristics that match those of other adult learners, the characteristics of my participants were varied and fluid as evidenced by their narratives about themselves as students, which I corroborated with field observations in their classrooms. Some preferred working independently while others enjoyed collaborative learning. The place they liked to occupy in the classroom varied amongst the women. The way they interacted with their classmates and instructors differed from each other and sometimes were context-dependent. Some of the women were proactive while others were admittedly procrastinators. Essentially, the only constant among them was variance.

Amber

I always sit near the front because I can see better. It changed because I used to sit in the back 'cause I used to be shy. Then I realized that I should sit toward the front because you can see. They use these projector screens now. You can see and if you have a low talking professor, you can hear what they saying and you don't have somebody all in the front of you. Some people on they phones. Then you got some people—especially these young ladies—they be having these hairdos that's out every which way. They don't mean any harm! Also, some people be talking and you can't hear nothing. So, I just sit toward the front now. I make sure I can see. That's the thing. I make sure I can see.

I can pick up which classes are gonna be the hardest, which classes I'm gonna have to put more emphasis on. When I first get into a class, I look at the syllabus and at those assignments and see how intense they are. I like planning ahead. I like to work by myself. Some professors are allowing us a choice now, "Do you wanna be in a group or you wanna be by yourself?" I always say, "By myself." I always ask, "Can I work by myself?"

Debbie

I always sit in the back. My thing is always at the back. I always sit at the back so I can see better. Even when I went to my art class, I sat at the back. I sat up higher, so I could have a better view of everything that was going on.

I have a crate that I take with me to every class. I have an organizer that I keep, and I organize my classes according to the times that the classes are scheduled. I usually keep a notebook of all my course syllabus. I'm organized. I have folders to keep loose-leaf information that teachers may give me so that I can keep things in order. I work better when things are organized. That's just my work ethic. That's the way I was brought up, even on the job. I believe in productivity, and I believe the more organized you are, the more you can get done. If you're not organized, you're all over the place trying to find stuff. That's why I feel like being organized is a key to success.

When the teacher is talking, I look at them while they're speaking. I'm very engaged. I take notes with paper and pencil. I'm a paper and pencil person. I think I'm very involved in class because I want to learn. I ask a lot of questions. I was told that I ask a lot of questions and because I'm asking questions, other kids are getting answers to things that they wanna know. Now that's one thing, my teachers have always been open.

If I needed examples or if I needed to know something, I could always go after class and they would assist me with what I needed for the most part.

When I first look at the syllabus and see an assignment I start working on it immediately. I don't have a job. I resigned from my job, so school is like my job. I put a lot of time into my work. We had a big group project once, and it was a big grade, so I immediately started working on it. My classmates weren't interested in starting early. I ended up doing all the work for it, but we did the presentation together. The presentation was wonderful. They pulled it off. I was very upset. I cried. I sent it out to everybody. I had their pictures on every different part. I went through a lot of trouble because that was my grade, and I didn't want anything to stop me from passing. They got the same grade that I got.

I'll never do that again. Looking back, I would probably go up the chain and talk to administration or something. I was so hurt and frustrated. The test that the professor gave us for that class, he had given us notes for it. I studied those notes, and he actually gave us something totally simple. Because he did that, it just threw me off and I did not pass that test because I had studied for something else. I ended up getting a B out of that class out of all that work that I had done. I felt like I had lost, and I was very frustrated because I had come to you and explained that they wasn't pulling their weight.

I want to know everything I need to know for test purposes, unlike the younger students that are in there. They depend on what I can remember a lot. Often, they ask me, "Well do you remember what such-and-such said about such-and-such?" And usually again I always have something to refer back or to help them remember what was said in class.

I always buy my books. Some students will not buy books. They take notes or whatever they do and rely on what I heard. But every book that has been assigned to us, I purchased. Now I'm kinda funny. I don't like writing in my books. It confuses me. But I would read my books. I tried my best to keep up with every reading that they told us to read.

I was once told by a professor about finding a resource, and I actually did it, and it worked. There was a book that we had, and it didn't have a workbook and the teacher didn't have the overhead notes or anything. So, my teacher said, "Whenever you find a book, look at the author's name, call that author, and they will send you extra resources," so I did. A classmate and I called the author. He was in Albany, New York. He gave us the password to go online and look at his lecture notes. He told us, "Whenever you buy that book, most of the time they will furnish you resources." So, I remembered that, and it worked.

My teachers' way of teaching—facilitating—was not an effective way of teaching for me. I don't learn well that way. I like to know and if I'm being tested on material, then I need to know what I'm being tested on. Giving me a book to read—all of it sounds important! But for what you're trying to get me to understand, I need to have some kind of outline of what it is you need me to understand. It really caused a lot of stress for me because I kinda did a lot of—perhaps I overdo things. Then I would begin to be called a perfectionist. At first, that was alright, but then again it became annoying because people began to think that I was trying to be perfect, but I wasn't. I was actually trying to understand what it is I needed to understand, but it caused me to be thorough, so I could understand what I'm doing.

I make sure I have all my assignments and if I have homework that night, I make sure my assignment is in a folder, labeled to the teacher. Some teachers did not like that, and I thought that was strange. I had one teacher who did not like for you to put things in folders. I don't know why she felt that way, but to me that was just professional. And that's what I thought, college would be more professional, teaching professionalism. So, I make sure I have all my assignments before I leave home so when I get to class, I'm handing my papers to my teachers.

I work on my assignments for a long time. The night before I turn them in, I'm brushing them up, printing them out or whatever. All my stuff was done way before it was due. Never went to class [at the last minute] preparing to turn anything in. Now there are times that I haven't gone to bed until like 3 o'clock in the morning. I'm staying up making sure everything is right because I know the minute I do I'm gonna forget something, and it's gonna cost me. That's how I feel. So, I always try to make sure the night before that everything is done, that's it packed in my crate, so I don't forget it.

Shaquita

When I go to class, I sit on the opposite side of everybody else in every class or I'll sit right up under my professor. For one, I'm a teacher's pet. It's gotten me far in life, so I sit right there. And I can't see so I like to make sure I'm seeing everything that's on the board. I cannot see whiteboards period. And then I don't like being around other people because they just do so much. They could be clicking pens or shuffling papers. I'm considerate of everything I do in class like chewing gum, popping my pens, flipping my binders, nah.

I bring a binder and a notebook and a little journal, so I can write down important stuff. I take handwritten notes. I never participate though because I'm shy. Everybody says that's hard to believe, but I am. I'm a shy person. I'm outgoing because I'm shy. You'll always see my personality because I'm always trying to hide behind something. In class, there's no room for me to be me. The teacher's up there, it's lecture. You can say what you got to say if you have to, but I can't be myself. It's hard for me to actually come out and say, "This is the answer to this," or "This is how I feel about that." I can't engage. I don't know. I get really quirky sometimes. I can't speak the way I wanna speak, especially in the White classes 'cause I could get vulgar. It's not that I really wanna be vulgar, it's just I feel like if you give it to them raw, that's the best way to understand so some things—I don't wanna make anybody uncomfortable because I know how I would feel if I was a White person and I'm teaching a class about slavery to a class full of Black students. Sometimes when they say things I'm want to just disagree, but I don't and then I'm ready to just go ahead and go! And I know that would make my teacher feel uncomfortable and make him feel like I'm just a combative person when I'm not.

In some cases, I don't feel as smart as everyone else because some can really, really articulate themselves like Jalyn Green. Jalyn can articulate, and she uses the word binary and negate in everything that she says. I looked the words up and I'm like, "Well she's not that smart." She ain't saying anything that I can't say. But it's just the fact that she articulates herself so well so I'm like, "Wow, you really speak well." Today I spoke in class, and I was kinda shocked too 'cause I was like, "Wow! Look at me with something to say!" It really engaged the professor, so I feel like when I do open up and

say what I have to say they like it, and they appreciate it. I think it's just me shying away from it, and me second guessing it and doubting myself. I wish I could be more confident to speak in class.

Even though I don't always participate, I engage with the professor and give them body language. You'll see me writing my notes, you'll see me nodding in agreement, and you'll see my face question. I have really open body language when I'm in my classroom because some people just sit there, and I just feel like that's disrespectful because to me it's hard enough to have to wake up and come and have to stand in front of class, then to have to teach something. And then you have several subjects to teach. The least I could do for 50 minutes is give you my undivided attention.

Shontae

I'm a procrastinator. If I tried to do something before time, I'm gonna go all around the world. I mean, it's gonna be everywhere! It's not gonna be exactly what it should be 'cause I'm gonna go left. I'm gonna think as far west as—I mean, it's just like that. Maybe that's just an excuse for me to be a procrastinator. I think that maybe it. I'll come home, and my kids will come in, and they're talking, and I'm like, "Wait no you can't talk to me now! I got a eight page paper I gotta type. I got eight pages I gotta type tonight, so whatever y'all got going on, we can talk about it tomorrow. But right now, no." And they'll just be like, "Okay, mama." But in my mind, I have everything. In my mind, I have how it's gonna go. It's just me sitting down getting the time to actually put it out there. So that's my personality.

It was hard to work in groups when my personality clashed with the other types. You have the procrastinator and then you have the one that wanna talk about what we

should do, but don't do it. I'm one of these people, I hate to keep talking about the same stuff over and over. That just drives me crazy. I don't wanna keep talking about it over and over. Like, "Are you gonna do it, or are we gonna talk about it?" I hate that. So that's that person that wanna talk about it and meet up and do all that kinda stuff. That drives me crazy 'cause I don't wanna keep meeting up talking about the same thing! Like, "Can we talk about something different? Can we talk about a different portion of the paper that need to be done?"

Then you have the perfectionist. Me and her were really good friends at the beginning, but by the end we don't even talk. And I'm a go-with-the-flow type person, but at a certain point, it's like, no. She called me at 6 o'clock in the morning. Six! Me! Six o'clock in the morning? Are you crazy? She called me. She said, "Can you come over and look at the paper?" I'm like, "No! Nuh uh!" And she's like, "Well, can you come over later?" I said, "I can come over about 10!" I mean, my kids ain't even got on the bus yet! So, she got upset about that, and I was kinda on edge anyway 'cause my aunt had just passed and my aunt stayed right down the street from her. So right after the funeral, I don't wanna go right down the road. I don't wanna be in that area, but she want me to come to her house and before I was coming to her house, and she wanted me to keep coming. I'm like, "No, I can meet you at the library," but she wanted me to come there. And I don't really feel like I should have to explain to people why I don't wanna do something. I don't know if that's me being selective about what I wanna share, but some things I don't wanna explain to people. I wanna say no and that be it. I don't wanna have to say, "Well, my aunt just passed and it's kinda difficult for me to come and ride past her house and she's not there." She knew she passed! She stayed right down

the street from her. As a matter of fact, I was at my aunt's house after the funeral and she called me and asked me a question about school. I'm like, "Not now!"

It was hard to work in a group with her. I often had to work with other nontraditional students in groups, and I'm more tech-savvy than they are, and if I don't know how to do it, I'm gonna figure it out and it's not gonna take me all day to do it. It kinda take them a long time, and I don't have that kinda time 'cause I still got some children I gotta raise. I wanna have a life. She got upset because we had worked on a paper 3 or 4 weeks and I'm like, "How much more can we do? How many more times do we have to keep revising and revising?" That drives me crazy! Let's do it, sit it down, move on to the next thing 'cause I have other stuff I have to do. So, she was upset, and she called me. She was like, "Everybody else is out doing everything, and I'm here working on work." Okay! That's you! Me, I don't have the liberty of sitting at home all day just doing that 'cause I still got three children to raise and I have a life. She was so upset about that. So, like I say, by the end, we weren't talking at all. Nobody else wanted to work with her either because she kinda take over. If I'm a part of the group, I need my input in it. It should be, "Okay this is how I want it done." She'll try to persuade you and then next thing you know, it ain't even yours, it's hers! Nuh uh.

I can work with people as long as you allow me to do what you need me to do. Let's delegate things out and then once we delegate it out, we can come back together and look at it, but don't micromanage me with the group work. Just don't 'cause that's gonna frustrate me if you think that I'm gonna get it to you when you say. Okay, I know I'm in a group. I gotta be mindful that I'm working in a group and I gotta make sure that my part is done so I go ahead, and I get it out of the way. But I'm not gonna work on it

every day of the week 'cause I got other stuff I gotta do too. So, I can work well with people, but just don't micromanage me and just don't talk about it all the time. Nuh uh, 'cause I'm thinking about something else. I got 10 other things I gotta do too!

Zoe

Me and my quadrant were all procrastinators. All of us. We never got anything done. We got it done at the last minute. I'm like that with all my assignments 'cause I'm tired and have a lot going on. I prefer to have this done before it's due, but I don't know, I'm just over it. I'm tired of school. I'm tired of trying to balance school and work and other stuff. I have to multitask at work. I do schoolwork at work. It's just tiring.

Sometimes I'll have like three or four papers due at the same time and I just go ahead and go through them. I'll get out of class and I'll go eat, then I'll go the lab and I'll be in the lab all day. Like one time I had a paper due like the next day and I had all this stuff to do, so that day that I was off, I stayed at the lab in the library from 7 o'clock in the morning until 12 o'clock at night working on a paper. I got it done.

There was a time when I was failing my classes. One of my problems was we had to do a lot of presentations, and I suck at speaking in front of people. I hate talking in front of people and that's the main thing I was failing because when I get in front of people, I just start freezing up! It doesn't matter who it is. I have gotten better at it. I just stuck through it. It was hard, but I just gotta do it. I knew I had to do it. I knew I had to do it, so I just did it! I prepared myself by reading my materials over. I made sure I familiarized myself with it. With words I didn't know, I made sure I Googled it, so I sound like I know what I'm talking about. That's what helped me.

What bothered me most was when I would get feedback after my teachers said one thing, and then would say another. I used to just take it, but then last semester I started speaking up 'cause I'm just like, "This is ridiculous. Y'all need to get on the same page." I brought it up and one of the professors was like, "Yeah, you're right. Maybe we could consider changing some things." At first, I didn't confront them because you're taught you're the student and they're the teacher. But you just get tired of same old, same old. I have been more boisterous and speaking up.

Last semester I confronted a professor on her behavior at a speaking engagement. I felt like she was unprofessional. You're teaching us to be professional and you say we shouldn't do this, but you're doing the opposite and I confronted her in class! The other students were afraid to speak because they were like, "She may retaliate." But I'm like, "If your ducks are in a row, if your grades are good, she can't just give you an F all of a sudden. No. These people are gonna look at your grades and see you've been doing good all the way up until this point. So, if you've been doing what you supposed to do, then she can't do anything to you!" I was telling them, "Y'all need to learn how to talk!" They was gonna allow this woman to talk to us any kind of way! Like how she talked to us, she talked to us really ugly! And it was in front of people! And I didn't get ugly with her because I would've been just as low as her. But when we got in that class I told her, "You could've handled that situation different, and you need to understand the whole situation before you start going off on people."

What had happened was, we was at [the local junior college]. She had an engagement there, but it wasn't just students. It was family members and other participants, and she called us out in front of people! She was just going off! Going off

on us and we didn't even have to be there! We were there to support her! We didn't have to be there. We did NOT have to be there. I held onto it! Sat on it! Ate on it and all that stuff until I got in that classroom, and I told her. She jumped behind that podium and we were going head on! I was not backing down because she's so used to getting things her way, and she thinks because she's a professor, we're just supposed to listen. No! Y'all teach us these things and so therefore, I'm gonna say something about it! Eventually one student chimed in too, and she really spoke up! Then once the professor seen that it was both of us going at her, she just broke down and started crying. She was telling us she had personal issues, and it wasn't really directed at us and just talking about the whole situation with them taking those professors out, it really affected her.

Analysis

Johnson-Bailey (2001) pointed out that “silence and passivity [are often] found among disenfranchised students” such as older women and minority students (p. 60). This was the case with Zoe until she underwent an interesting and notable transformation in terms of speaking up. Reentry women often show “surprising deference” toward their professors but with “high expectations” (Johnson-Bailey, 2001, p. 11). Zoe exhibited those characteristics, particularly with regard to the high expectations she had for her instructors' professionalism. She admitted that she used to keep her opinions to herself, but when she finally had enough, she spoke up and began asserting herself when her professors' behaviors failed to live up to her high expectations for consistency or professionalism.

The story that Zoe relayed, including the passive students afraid of retaliation and her taking the risk of confrontation, has been noted in literature on Black reentry students

“as a way of coping with the challenges of their educational environment” (Coker, 2003, p. 670). Coker (2003), in extending on the work of Johnson-Bailey (2001), added the coping strategies she found among her participants, including the struggle Zoe described. Coker’s (2003) participants reported having to choose between passivity as a way of negotiating the challenges in academia and clearing their conscience by confronting their professors when they felt so led.

Shaquita’s experiences in the classroom are not unlike those of other Black reentry women found in the literature. She described feelings of timidity and doubt in the classroom and explained that she did not perceive herself to be as articulate as one of her younger counterparts. Johnson-Bailey (2001) described a similar phenomenon:

If there is a negative bond shared by most reentry women, no matter the economic level, race, or ethnicity, it is self-doubt. Despite the burgeoning numbers of nontraditional college women and regardless of the common success stories found within this group, they continue to doubt their abilities. Unfortunately, they often wonder whether they fit in and whether they are as smart or as quick as the average college student. Reentry women are becoming the “average” college student. They appear smarter than their younger counterparts when GPAs are compared. When told this, reentry women downplay the significance and attribute it to the wisdom and seriousness that come with age. (p. 79)

Additionally, Shaquita worried that she may come across as vulgar if she were to express how she really felt in the classroom, a phenomenon that Coker (2003) found among the Black female reentry participants in her study. She explained, “many women were reluctant to express themselves for fear that showing any sign of emotion would be

perceived as unprofessional or inappropriate in the sterile landscape of the academic environment” (Coker, 2003, p. 670). With this, Shaquita is employing the coping strategy of silence to deal with her instructors (Coker, 2003).

Perspectives on the Institution

The women in this study had very strong opinions regarding their instructors and the curriculum, which was wholly unsurprising to me as they spent most of their time as students engaging with their professors and the curriculum. In addition to working with their instructors, the women also had to interface with non-academic offices. Together, these experiences constituted the totality of their experience and shaped their perspectives of the institution, which is why I combined the categories of instructors and the curriculum and overall experience to create the theme of perspectives on the institutions.

Instructors and the Curriculum

All of the women shared their experiences with and opinions on their instructors and how the curriculum was presented to them. Most of them lamented the general lack of professionalism they experienced with faculty on campus. In some cases, this meant unprofessional behavior in how faculty interacted with students and in others, it meant the faculty were not appropriately responsive or punctual.

A few of the women commented on the teaching styles they encountered at the university. Unbeknownst to Debbie, Shontae, and Zoe when they started at Dabny State, the professors would employ a facilitative approach to teaching, for which these women felt unprepared. All six participants resented what they considered a lack of quality and timely feedback on their assignments. Each of them took their education seriously and considered quality and timely feedback a necessary component of effective instruction.

Amber

My classes are good. [Dabny State] got some good professors that really teach. You run into about one or two that don't teach worth you know what. I'm like, "You need to teach so folks learn stuff." But they are some good teachers and they instill in you to gain knowledge of what you're learning 'cause you gonna use it in the future. The key thing is picking the right professors. My ideal professor is somebody that teaches really well. Like if it's a hard subject, the fact that you know it verbatim and teach it to you in a simple way. I like for when they teach to break the elements down and give a good example of it. Don't teach too fast and everything.

When I was in Biology II, it was harder than Biology I. Biology II was a little difficult 'cause relearning about what I learned in school and everything, but I hadn't been in school in a long time. I forgot a lot of things. I was homeschooled, but the one thing about it, one of my favorite subjects was science, so I loved the biology part about it. I loved it. I didn't forget everything, so a lot of things came back to me. But of course, we had other things so when I got to certain subjects in that, it was a little difficult. She taught very simple. She gave examples. She didn't teach too fast and everything. That helped me out.

Two things that might make me drop a class immediately is if the professor got a bad attitude or if the professor don't teach, like they try to pass you on. Don't do that. Basically, if you know I'm not doing well, don't try to like give me the answers to the test. 'Cause some professors, they will go over test questions and test answers. Don't do that! I'm like, "You're not really teaching."

I had another professor—now I had encountered some strange professors, but this one here is different. He teaches like he at the house talking amongst friends. I'm like, "You supposed to have a filter." Some words you saying like, "Did you really just say that?" The most respectful professors wouldn't talk like that. He was very unprofessional. I'm like, "Really?" I looked around the class like, "You're speaking like that?" I'm sitting here like, "Did you really say that?"

And then he have a attitude. The fact that you're not teaching well and when I tell you the test was worded very difficult, it's as if you didn't understand what I was talking about. Some of the stuff on the test wasn't even in the book! I withdrew from the class. I noticed the class was getting thin. No matter how hard you study, you can study that book down to a T, you can Google and study, you think you be ready for the test and the test questions be nothing you went over. I studied real hard, but nuh uh. It wasn't my fault and it was like he didn't have no problem with it. So, it was like, "You a professor?"

Debbie

For the most part, I think I had a good relationship with my teachers but looking back, it's not as good as I thought it should've been as far as an instructor. I did not expect for in the university level to be facilitated. I was still thinking in the mind of a 2-year school where they actually taught and that was one of the things that kinda bothered me because a lot of times I was teaching myself, so when I looked to my instructors to explain things, they're looking at me like, "No, you need to go find out," which was not bad, but at that time when you're going through it, I don't understand this. I need somebody to tell me what this means.

The teacher refused to give you notes or use overhead notes. They're telling you to read like three and four chapters and it's like, "You read, and you come back and you tell me what you need to know." So, in class we're talking about the things that people are coming back asking questions about, but my take on that was you're the instructor, so you tell me what's important that I need to know and if I have questions about it, then let me ask you about it. Don't just give me a book and tell me to read it and then you come back and then tell me what you need help with. It was just that part that about it that was different for me—the facilitating part when you're on your own. I thought maybe higher up education like master's kinda do that, but I didn't expect that on the bachelor's level 'cause I thought it was still a learning process where you're still being taught things that you need to know so when you do go on the master's level then you kinda know how to maneuver things around or research to find out things. So that was kinda strange to me. It was not an effective way of teaching for me. I do not learn well that way.

I just feel like had I understood the university level as far as facilitating, I probably would've had a better start and that's something I mentioned to my faculty advisor. When people are coming in, explain to them that you're on the university level. I know it's kinda small and most people probably know this, but I said, "It's not so much teaching. It's being facilitated. Explain that to them because otherwise they'll be complaining, 'What is this? What's going on?'" Once another student told me it was being facilitated, I had to come back and approach school a totally different way and that's something they leave out. They think you should know. And that's the thing about the university level, you should know, but everything you don't know. Some things, like the basic housekeeping things, let people know. I think it would've made a big

difference for me if I had known what they were expecting me to do or what was expected of me as a student.

Our professors often gave us no feedback on our assignments. I only had like maybe one or two teachers that actually gave feedback. I don't care if I made a 98, I wanna know what I got wrong because I still feel like I need to know that because it was a part of that test. Some people feel as though, "You passed. Let it go." No. I still wanna know what was it that I missed? I wanna know. That bothered me. But a lot of times we would just get grades. We never got our papers back. Never got them back so you really didn't know what you did right or what you did wrong, you just got a passing or failing grade. My point with that was I couldn't learn if I didn't know what I got wrong. That was my point! For those teachers that I did get feedback, I really appreciated it because it helped me to know what I needed to do to improve or what I needed to change.

Also, the teachers need to stop talking about themselves so much and really focus on helping the students reach their potential that they need. Like they say, "Realize your potential." They really need to do what their slogan says— "Realize your potential." That's what they need to do—help students realize their potential. You may come in and not be a good writer, but by the end when you leave with our resources we have gotten and by exposing them to different things and helping them to realize their potential—let's work on what you already have. Just stop talking about yourself so much and focus on us! I'm thinking that they're thinking it's being a role model but think about it. It's very disheartening when you're older and you're going into a classroom and you don't have that much and you really already don't see yourself making it. You're already struggling,

so you don't want to sit there and listen to what somebody else has accomplished. And then the way they say it!

These people are my age with all these degrees! I say that just because you have degrees don't mean you're a teacher. If you can't teach me or get across to me what you know, you not a teacher! You're able to break down what you know to at least help me to kinda understand what you talking about. Give me a framework of what you're trying to show me how to do. Not doing it for me but give me a framework. Let me work. And then if I don't do it to my potential, then you come back and say, "Okay, I see that you tried, but I might have to move this word over here, move this word over there, now this is what we come up with." I feel some sense of, I helped! I'm not asking you to do it for me! Show me!

I feel like more nontraditional students are more hands on than visual. Instructors need to realize you have kinesthetic learners and visual people. They need to go back and remember those things. Everybody is not one way. If those people on the lower level understand that, college people need to know the same thing. It does not help that you know. They teach kids that in school—recognize how you learn. You should know how you learn, but if somehow you didn't get that, you don't know how you learn and they need to incorporate that back into their skill. How do you learn? Let's find out. And I think that goes back to orientation. Somehow, they need to incorporate that into that. How do you learn? Do you need to write things down? Do you need to use recorders? Maybe it should be some kinda class that they go through. I don't know. But learning how to takes notes and all that. They should already know, but we realize again everybody didn't start through high school. They're more geared to the kids that's

coming out of high school and that's the part that I think was a big gap because well y'all should've had this. Well, guess what? I didn't have that 'cause when I went to school, they wasn't teaching that. They need to incorporate working more with the nontraditional student. Each program need to realize that you can't just cookie-cutter everything. You got different people. You got the nontraditional student, you got those that are middle-aged, and you got those that are fresh out of high school and then you've got them all mixed up and that's a big problem.

Kayla

What I've struggled with is that where I come from I'm used to certain things being required from me and I think that [the junior college] was much harder. I knew what my teachers wanted there and if it wasn't that way, it just wasn't okay. This school is more laid back. They're not as stern. They're not stern at all. My professors here are much more lenient. At my junior college, when it's due, it's due. You didn't turn it in? Why didn't you turn it in? Were you at the hospital? Was somebody dying? Here, you can turn in a paper 4 weeks late and they'll grade it. That was like, "Oh my God. You're kidding me!"

Maybe if I was 18, it would be like, "Okay, I'm partying. Let me turn it in 4 weeks late." But at this point in my life, I need you to be stern. I'm in the real world. I got to go try to get a license. I don't need you to be lackadaisical on me and then I get in there to take my state boards and I haven't learned what I need to learn because you being lackadaisical. I'm not gonna pass state boards. I'm gonna flunk what I need to know. I need rigor because if I'm paying for education—you've been there. You're teaching me what I need to do, so I need to know it so I can do what I need to do to be

successful in my career. I just wanna know what I need to know. I'm paying for an education. It's not cheap and I need to know what I need to know.

When I turn a paper in, some teachers will never give that paper back. There's some papers I have never received back! I don't want you to be scared of my feelings or that—this is one thing I've seen and maybe I'm wrong, but this is what I think. I think the teachers here are striving for tenure and so it's like, "I can't flunk this person" or "I can't flunk this many people or they're gonna go tell on me." I think there's some fear of being an awesome teacher and doing what it takes to be a teacher to get you what you need because obviously there's been people who say, "Okay, this professor is flunking everybody and they need to be fired" or something like that. But instead of them looking into it and see this teacher's just on their game and these students are just not doing what's required. I think some of that is going on so when a teacher might want to say something, they might not say something, and they might just give you a B or a C when you deserve a F because they want tenure, or they want to keep their job or something like that.

My teacher's style affects my work habits. Me, I can write a paper in the middle of the night and turn it in. But if I know I have a strenuous teacher, I'm not gonna do that. I'm gonna prepare better. But if I know that I got a lackadaisical teacher, of course I'm gonna write the paper in the middle of the night! You don't care! I don't want somebody to feel sorry for me because I'm 35 and I work, and I have an adult life. Don't feel sorry for me. I chose to go back to school. That's my decision, so I need to deal with what I chose. Don't put leeway on me because, "Oh, she worked all weekend. Let her turn that paper in next weekend." No, because you're not doing that for them and

then that causes chaos in the class because they see me turning in the paper late, but they had to turn the paper in on time. I don't think that's fair 'cause that's actually teaching them that when you get up in life that it's different. Life is not like that, so I don't think somebody should be doing that for me because I'm 35 and I worked all weekend. No. Make my paper due just like everybody else's paper is due.

I did have one rigorous teacher and I've learned some lessons with her. I've written things the night before and she tore it apart. She ain't the one to be played with. So, after my assignment that I did the night before, she wasn't so hard on me, but basically, she was like, "I understand that you're working and stuff like that, but I can't excuse that." She was like, "On your next paper, you need to get it together. Start planning. If you need some help, let me know 'cause I know you got a lot going on in your life." She was like, "Start planning and do the assignment ahead of time. I can tell you just did this in the middle of the night and you're better on that." So, she kinda slapped me on the wrist, but she also encouraged me as well as to slap me on the wrist and I got it together.

Shaquita

Getting feedback from my instructors is important, but the feedback I get depends on the instructor because some of them are fairly lazy. I have one professor who gives great feedback. She will spend an extensive amount of time just talking to you about your work. She'll say, "Maybe if you move this sentence here and cut this information out, you might have a more effective argument." She will literally stop what she does to help you, even if it's not her class. Other professors do a lot of one sentence type of feedback.

We have a few professors that really love us. I can tell they love us because of the amount of work that they put into us and the amount of explanations they give us. One professor, when you go into his office, he would be pulling stuff out of there and looking online and anything you said you need, he's like, "Oh, I got a article. Let me find this article for you." Then he will rummage through his office trying to find a article just to give it to you instead of saying, "Go online and find it." And when you need help, he's not like a 20-minute person in the office. He's going to help you until you're done. He's going to help you until you understand and he's going to talk it all the way through. They answer the phones. They see students calling, they answer their phones. They reply to emails. They come to class. For Pete's sake, it's their scheduled classes. Stop cancelling them. I don't like it when they cancel class because if you're gonna test me on something, then you need to be there to teach it. That's just how I feel.

Shontae

I wish my professors would have given more guidance. They would tell me, "This is your paper. You need to go by the guidelines in the syllabus." But then the guidelines are so vague and it's like, "Am I giving you what you want? Am I on the right track?" And you kinda don't know until you get your paper back and then you like, "Oh, that's what she meant." They left us to our own devices a lot rather than guiding. Now that I know what a facilitator is, now it makes sense. Now it makes sense that they're not actually there to teach. You kinda self-guided. I think had I known that from the start, then I would've approached it differently.

When I started, I was expecting teaching! Like the good old-fashioned, "This is what this is," with maybe some examples. I'm thinking just teaching. But I think had

they said, “Okay, we’re facilitators and what you have to do is you read over the material, you come back, and ask me questions about it.” I think I would’ve went at it differently because I would have been prepared to ask questions about things because sometimes, it’s still that intimidation because you’re sitting there and then you don’t wanna come off as the dodo in the room. Like, “What does this mean?” And it’s like because you asked the question, it’s not gonna be received with a smile every time. It might be received with a little like, “What?”

And this was the biggest thing—critical thinking. What is critical thinking? Y’all keep saying it, but what is it? Nobody could just break down what critical thinking was! To me, I felt like that was the hardest definition for them to kinda just come out and say, “Just think outside of the box. Think about every aspect of the situation.” I’m just like, “Y’all keep saying critical thinking, can somebody just tell me?” I’m reading it, I’m trying to link it, but it’s like what? I think I would’ve used more critical thinking skills, just asking questions and knowing that I have to go in here completely prepared to ask questions and to have a list of questions. I think that’s what I would’ve done.

A few of my professors didn’t give a lot of feedback. One professor though, she reads everything. The first time we turned in something, I got my paper back and all I seen was red lines. I’m just like, “What? Wait, what?” I’m looking and I’m shaking like, “Oh my God!” But she gives you constructive criticism that’s really helpful because—like for instance, one time I typed a paper right before class. It was just all over the place. I ended up getting a C on it. She told me, “This is not your best work. You rushed through this. Next time you need to make sure you take time out to do your work correctly. And I was like, “Okay. You chewed me out for my paper, but you was

absolutely right!” She was! I can appreciate that. After that, I know that she’s really paying attention and I knew to just make sure when I turned in assignments to her that they were my absolute best. I knew that wherever it lacked, she would let me know so then I could pick it up on the next go around. That was extremely helpful and that’s how it’s designed to be.

Zoe

Only some of my instructors provide support. Some would give you the knowledge and then there were some that you had to read and get the information yourself. I prefer them giving me the knowledge. That’s what I’m used to at [the local junior college]. The way the professors here do things, they run their classes different from [the local junior college]. Their attitudes—they’re not professional all the time like I’m used to. They’re not professional at all times. They can retaliate and most of the time it’s based on whether they like you or not whether they gonna pass you. They just not professional. There are times when they cancel class and then they don’t have all their paperwork turned in. They haven’t graded the paperwork, they lose paperwork. I’m not gonna say all of them are like that. I don’t know. I’m just not used to that. I’m used to [the local junior college]. They’re like, “Hey, this is what you need turned in. It’ll be turned in by this date. You’ll receive your grade.”

My teachers here don’t really teach. They facilitate. They’re not like teachers who go to school for education where they teach you how to teach. These are just people who are in the community who are teaching their experience, I guess. They’re trying to teach what’s in the book, but no. They don’t know how to teach. I did not know they were going to be facilitators. I was expecting teaching. Just teaching us certain things

instead of saying, “Okay, refer back to the book.” You could read that book 50 times and you still won’t understand unless somebody can really teach it to you so that it can stick in your mind ‘cause reading, sometimes it just flows somewhere else.

Analysis

The women in this study held high expectations for their professors, which is also found in the literature on these women. As Johnson-Bailey (2001) explained, the characteristics of reentry women cause them to have high expectations:

So many reentry women . . . struggle with doubt. Quite often nontraditional women students are hardworking and driven. They are not going to college because it is expected but because they want to go. As serious-minded students . . . they often approach their professors with surprising deference but with high expectations. (p. 11)

The women in this study especially epitomized this characteristic of the nontraditional student. She expects a lot from her professors, including a high level of professionalism, high quality teaching, and valid exams.

Debbie offered a solution for the university to address the academic difficulties that she was having, which was similar to a suggestion that Thomas (2001) made in her study on Black reentry mothers—orientation courses or programs to help reentry women cope with the issues they are facing as students. Thomas’s (2001) instructive for an orientation was more for helping Black mothers interface school, work, and family, but included a suggestion for programs that would address study skills. This is similar to Debbie’s desire for a program that could help reentry women better understand their

learning style and orient them to the facilitator style of teaching that she and several of the women received at the HBCU.

Overall Experience

Collectively, the women in this study had a negative overall experience at the HBCU, which seemed to result from the totality of many minor inconveniences, disorganized processes, and bad interactions with faculty and staff. To be sure, the women did report good times, pleasant experiences, and fond memories, but those were overshadowed by the bad. Based on my initial conversations with Debbie and experience in working at the institution, I was not surprised that the women lodged so many complaints about the institution in their interviews. The most unexpected finding from this analysis was that only two women out of six found value in the majority-minority setting of the HBCU and what it meant to them as Black women to be in an institution so ingrained with Black culture and surrounded by so many Black intellectuals.

Debbie

You have to know people at an HBCU. If I would not have followed up on things when I first got here, I would've been lost. It just seem like people—I don't know. And that was the thing that I didn't understand when I was in the 2-year school where they took care of everything. Once we registered for class, we just go to the next building. Your schedule's already printed, you just go get it. I couldn't understand why you come here, you got all day. People waiting in line, people frustrated. They can't get things right. Then the financial aid office—I wanna know what little man behind the curtain is keeping all this stuff going! It's kinda like going to the emergency room and you see all

these people working, but nobody is getting any help. And you wanna know, “What are they doing?”

[*Tell me your favorite thing about attending this HBCU.*] Well, that’s kinda a difficult question because of how I feel about a HBCU. It’s not what I thought it was. Maybe in times past, it was. I felt it was developed to give African Americans an education because otherwise we would not have an opportunity to go to school and that’s why it was that warm fuzzy feeling. Like, “Oh wow! That’s what it’s for!” But then when I looked at the education, to me it’s different. I don’t know what it would be like to maybe go to a predominantly White university, but compared to the 2-year school, I felt that the 2-year school prepared me better than the HBCU because at the 2-year level, we had more resources. We had labs we could go to. The teachers had office hours where you could go to. They took time out to give you handouts, anything that would make it easier for you to understand. We had writing labs where you could go to where people would sit down with you and go over your paper and not get told, “Well, I’m not writing that for you.” But you know, some of us should have better writing skills, but we don’t. Everybody lacks something. So that was a big thing that I did not like at the university level. After getting here, after the hard work that it took for me to get here, I was expecting things to be out of this world. Just out of this world! It was gonna be so much better. I was gonna have that pride! I came from a university! But it didn’t end like that.

I walked in here with all these expectations! I always heard the negative parts about the school, but it was just the fact of getting here. I’ve worked in a high school and I always heard the children say, “I’m not going to [Dabny State University].” They wanted to go everywhere else, but they always ended up back at [Dabny State]. And then

I look at—because it runs so deep—I’m not saying that I don’t appreciate this opportunity because I do. It wasn’t all bad. I did get recognized in the end for my hard work. In the beginning I didn’t see it, but it came to fruition afterwards and I just felt like if it was better at the beginning part, I would’ve felt more better about my education than what I did.

Getting my scholarship at the end was a real turning point. I hate to say it, but when I graduated it was kinda bitter. I remember from 2-year school sitting there when graduating and just looking up into the rafters and everything just proud and soaking it all in. Then here I was at [Dabny State] in this huge civic center looking at the banners and everything, looking at all the people around, and I was expecting to be excited! But then I looked down the row and I’m seeing the people that’s graduating with me and I’m saying, “Some of them probably shouldn’t have graduated because of how they act.” But they were graduating with me and I felt guilty afterwards because that’s not the whole idea about the thing. I think the whole purpose of it—I made it. I didn’t look at the fact that my accomplishments got me where I am. I was the one that was awarded. Nothing that they did could take that from me. I really felt like it took from me because I’m looking at it, I’m seeing the struggle, but they didn’t care! Long as they was sitting there, they didn’t care about the honors, they didn’t care about anything! Here I am with all these medallions on, I should’ve been so proud! Instead, I was sitting there sulking!

Afterwards, I said, “You know, you should’ve been happy for yourself. You have accomplished something that you didn’t even think that you was gonna do.” I hadn’t even planned to get a bachelor’s degree at first. I was gonna stop at associate’s. So that was one of the things that I regret the most—that I did not feel that pride. So, when

award time came around, they sent me a letter to come to honor's day. I said, "Lord, let me have a better attitude." I didn't even get called on the stage, but I stood with pride because that's something you honored me with and don't let anyone take that from you, that hard work that you put in.

I would go in that lab and I would stay. I had to find ways to get what I needed, and it was like finding a needle in a haystack. It was just different. Never before had I had to struggle like I did here. I didn't have to struggle when I was at the 2-year school because everything I needed was right at my fingertips. People helped you, they smiled, they was happy to help you! Students were happy to share information with you! Nobody thought they were bigger than anybody else. Even if we made the same grade, we high-fived each other! Here, it was totally different. My classmates weren't even trying! And it's not that they couldn't do it. That's what's frustrating. It's not that they couldn't do it. They just didn't want to do it.

Kayla

I will say this, I think at an all-White school, they demand more than at a all-Black school. I don't know if I'm making the right assumption, but I just know my school was harder at [the junior college] than it is at [Dabny State]. To me, that school has less Black people and it's harder. This school has more Black people and it's easier. It's like they lower the standards.

I wish I would've went to [another nearby university]. The education here sucks. Coming from where I came from and the standard of what I came from to come here—it's totally different. I don't care about this being a HBCU. I'm 35. I don't care about no historically Black nothing. When I was younger I wanted to go to an HBCU because I

wanted to get the experience. But now that I'm my age I don't care. I mean I don't care! I care about the quality of my education. In some of my classes, there are a lot of people that are saying stuff about HBCUs and the education that comes up under a HBCU. The education is much better when you don't come to a HBCU. So, when it comes to people my age, maybe that's why it's so low a number here because people have heard this stuff and you don't have time for that when you are my age. I think that might be what scares people my age from coming here.

Shaquita

What I love about going to an HBCU is I love the fact that it's a lot of people that look like me. I love the fact when I walk, and I see the women, they have natural hair. I love that. I love the fact that there are a lot of Black faculty and staff. I think everything I do love about it is just the fact that it embraces Black culture in a way that even when you're listening to the music that plays in the student center, it's Black music. I just love that. Another thing I love about this school is it's in the heart of an area that's so underdeveloped, but then the school itself has so much pride.

I love here, everybody puffs up. I like it because if you feel big, it puts you in a position at this point in life to continue to feel big. And you can say, "Yeah, I graduated from an HBCU." And somebody can say, "Oh, that's just a Black school," but then it's like the things that you talked about at your HBCU, the things that you were able to get—like a fair education. If your teacher did not like you, it's because you're doing something wrong, not because you're Black.

When I went to the [private PWI], I was undoubtedly one of the most intelligent women in the class—not because I felt that way, but clearly the scores showed it, my

ability to respond to things, my ability to analyze things—it was easy. It got to the point, all through school, I was the first one done. I was the first one turning stuff in and getting As, but I would be the last one asked to do something like to speak, to show an example in class, to help another student, to tutor—just anything. It's like they'd rather let their average student do it because they fit the part. But here, at an HBCU, we all fit the part.

What I love is that makes it better when you're in a pool full of people that are just like you, you really get to appreciate what each person has to offer. The thing that's different is yes, White students have their own experiences, but considering the fact that the world is already set up for them, there are a lot of different obstacles and things that Black students have to go through, even when it comes down to family, relationships, just out and about day-to-day things that Black people face. When we're all in the same setting, it's like, "Hmm. What's some of your situations that you had to overcome that got you here to this point?" We can relate to each other.

Now when it comes to talking about racism, I feel less comfortable at the HBCU than I did at a PWI. To effectively engage in a conversation about it without all the emotions and hatred, no, I can't do that here because when you're fueled by emotion, you tend to be less logical and less reasonable. Personally, I feel safer in a room full of White people talking about racism because I already know how they feel. I already know exactly what emotions are going to be projected. I already know the arguments and I know the generalized statements like "All Lives Matter." I already know all that. So, I feel like it's easier for me to make an educational argument and get their educational argument versus just like feelings.

In a room full of Black people, it's a lot of questions that will never get answered because we're just so emotional about it. It angers us. We're bitter about it. That's the one thing I can say. We are bitter about it. But in a room full of White people, there's no need to give the feelings. I feel safer. Talking to my White professor about racism in this country, it's just more educational. It's more informative instead of just hurtful.

Shontae

What I really like about attending a HBCU is to actually see a group of Black people with Ph.Ds. and a lot of education. Going out—if you just at Walmart—you don't know who has a Ph.D. 'cause everyone just looking the same. But to know that they've come from all different walks of life and it's like wow! Okay! It makes the dream seem more attainable when you actually see somebody that looks like you doing something it makes it more realistic for you. I really like that. Just to hear that they've done and the fields and areas they've worked in, it's just like wow.

The best experience I had here was graduation, of course, just completing it all. I was done. I did it! You know? Originally, just going through the process of it, I was kinda like, "Can I do it?" I did have bad experiences here though. Now what I always tell people, "You need to follow up on your application. Follow up on everything. You're gonna have to go out there." They shouldn't have to, but you know. Here you gonna have to do it because if you don't, you'll be in limbo forever. I can see that if you don't really just go ahead and do what you need for yourself—'cause essentially I think that's what it is. You're having to make sure that everything is done and it's gonna benefit you in the end, so you kinda need to follow up on things, and not just put something in and then expect them to do it. What they call it, a wish-granting factory?

Just put something in and something just come out. I can see how that experience just made me more aware of what I need to ask people, communicating with other students, talking with them about different things, because everybody's experience is different. You may know more about this than me. If I mention something to you, you might be able to tell me who I need to talk to to get this issue resolved. So, I can see how I built relationships from saying, "Hey, this is what's going on with me" and the next thing, "Oh, go talk to this person. They can help you." But I tell people that you gotta go out there and that once you get into your classes, it's a different vibe than when you're dealing with Financial Aid and the Admissions Office. Once you get through those hurdles, it's smoother. What I liked the least about attending a HBCU, aside from the whole admissions process, I think they left us to wonder a lot. And I understand that they're supposed to help you become better thinkers, but in some instances, they could have explained some stuff. Like it was some stuff you could've just said, "Hey, this is what I'm looking for."

Zoe

I didn't come here for the HBCU stuff. I really like the diversity of [the local junior college]. I don't really care about the HBCU and stuff like that. I don't really care about that. My favorite thing about attending school here was the people in my quadrant. I appreciate it just being us. I appreciate our relationship and the support group that we have. We are all a support. We support one another. I made friends with them. We go out to eat, celebrate birthdays and stuff. We very close. We will be together forever. It's really not that much good here. The only thing that's good is the people in my quadrant

really. That's it. I like some of the professors, I'll say that. I like the personal, informal relationship I had with them.

What I liked least about being at this HBCU was professionalism. It's just the whole school really. They're not professional. Like sometimes—you know, I had a professor talk about basketball, but you late and we haven't even started class yet. I don't like stuff like that. But when we do something, then it's like, "You gotta be professional." But you're not professional. You don't come in here with no gym shorts or on your phone caking!

Some of the professors are all about themselves. They're not here for the students like they would claim. You don't feel included. We had opportunities to join clubs, but it's like, I feel we have to do the work in order for it to run smoothly and we don't have time 'cause we have so much work to do! I think that's what our professors really want—for us to take the initiative to jump start some stuff and to take the load off of them, but they fail to realize that we have a lot of stuff and we don't want to fail. We can't balance. We can't include that stuff in our day-to-day life.

They're just not professional here at the HBCU. I'm sorry. I'd rather go to a PWI. I hate to say it, but when you have too many Black people, we slack! We slack really bad! This school could be better, but they just—the attitude! I think it's just people that's not used to having power. They misuse it. And then the people at PWIs, they're used to being in higher positions. They know how to handle themselves. They're used to it. It's like old money, new money. You know how to act. But people here, they misuse their power here. That's just it.

Analysis

The opinions that Shaquita and Shontae shared about the institution suggest that the HBCU could have a lasting positive impact on their self-image as college-educated Black women. Both described pride in seeing a place where so many other Black people are educated and proud of themselves and their culture. Shaquita especially enjoyed the institution's outward display of and appreciation for Black culture around campus. In contrast, Debbie's pride in herself as an HBCU student was weakened by the institution's inability to meet her expectations when she entered. Only when the institution showed pride in her by awarding her at the end of her matriculation did Debbie see the value of her HBCU education.

Ultimately, the women's academically-related criticisms combined with their non-academic experiences to create a collectively negative overall experience at the HBCU. For Zoe, the lack of professionalism overshadowed anything positive that arose from attending the HBCU. Similarly, and perhaps most damaging, was Kayla's seeming lack of intellectual value in the institution, which does not bode well for her long-term connection with the school. As we have seen with the women in this study, a family connection can be a powerful recruiting tool for the institution and satisfied alumni benefit the institution financially in the long term. With these women leaving largely dissatisfied with their education and experiences at the HBCU, the institution risks losing their long-term support and any benefits that would arise from that.

Persistence

Despite the experiences that delayed their entry into college and the roadblocks, barriers, and challenges the women faced throughout their matriculation, they persisted

and overcame them all. Of the six women in the study, four graduated over the course of the study and two are graduating within the year. During their interviews, the women mentioned different factors that supported their persistence throughout their reentry experience. Entering into the data analysis phase of this study, I did not have persistence as an *a priori* category. During the data collection and analysis, I was intentionally looking for institutional responsiveness to try and gauge how well the institution supported nontraditional students. What I found instead was that where the institution was lacking in support services, the women's resiliency, resourcefulness, and relationships kicked in and filled the void. Together, the women and the institution provided support for persistence. As a result, I have organized factors supporting persistence into two categories: non-institutional and institutional.

Non-Institutional Factors Supporting Persistence

As this section demonstrates, the women in this study have an immeasurable amount of tenacity and grit that allowed them to persist through the challenges they faced as nontraditional students. For these women, breaking cycles and finishing what they started were important motivators for persevering through college, no matter how tough the challenge.

Debbie

My husband used to get so aggravated with me about how I did my schoolwork! I contribute that to OCD. I'm very passionate about what I'm doing, and I spend a lot of time. I stay focused. He would say, "It don't take all that! I done been to [Dabny State]! I got at least four degrees. It doesn't take all that!" It just came naturally to him. We've actually done book studies together because he's actually read some of the books that we

were assigned. He would do it with me. Sometimes he would sit down, and he would read with me, especially if it was something that I felt like I couldn't comprehend. He would read it with me and explain it to me, so I liked the book studies that we would do together.

I've never considered quitting or withdrawing or stopping. Never! That's the thing, the ongoing thing. Once I started something, I have to finish. I don't care how hard it is or how difficult it is. I have to finish. Once I started here, I would have to finish. It's just part of my nature. I couldn't just leave and go somewhere else. I have to finish what I'm doing.

Kayla

I'm gonna show my family that I'm gonna make it regardless. I guess it's my own determination to say, "I'll get this." I have no support. I have a lot of odds against me and I'm still gonna do it. I'm gonna prove it to myself. I can't give up because I owe it to myself not to give up. It definitely ain't nothing that my family got going on that keeps me motivated.

Failure is just not an option for me. I can't give up. I have to be successful. I don't have a choice. I have a job, a townhouse, and a car, but that's just not enough. I wanna leave a legacy. I have to leave a legacy. And I have to leave a legacy that says just because this happened to you or that happened to you, doesn't mean you can't get here. I have no family support, my family didn't graduate, my siblings didn't graduate. I have to be different. I don't know. I just have to be different. I don't care how tired I am. I don't care how hard it is. I just have to be different.

I'm staying in school and I'm staying at [Dabny State] because I just feel like I gotta make it through the odds. Even at my workplace, if I don't like something, I'm not just gonna leave my job. I'm gonna try to see if I can make things better before it's my last hope. So, this semester I'm really just praying and trying to hope that it gets better.

If I had to give advice to another nontraditional student, I would say, "You just gotta keep fighting." This ain't easy by far. When I tell you there are days I think, "What in the heck have I done?" I'm like, "What are you doing? What have you done? You can go get a job, a 8 to 5 somewhere. What are you doing? You're putting your life on hold!" And I am. There are nights I do not want to go to work. I hate working overnight, but what choice do I have? I don't have a choice. Sometimes, you just gonna have to live life later. I'll live life later. I don't have a choice.

This will definitely be worth it in the end. I'm breaking generational curses, just like I said. I have five brothers and sisters and none of us have been to college and graduated. I'm the only one who has been to college and graduated. What I learned in one of my classes is you have to break cycles. Somebody has to know that education is important and so for my parents, they took the live now, not live later. They took the "I got the husband, I got some kids, so I gotta live now, not later." It's all about your decisions. You can either live now or live later. It's gonna be great when I get there.

Shontae

I never considered quitting because I really wanted to graduate. That was my ultimate goal as far as that, so I felt like if I would have withdrew, I wouldn't start back. Something was gonna happen. For me, something was gonna happen, and it was gonna push me a semester back and then another semester back. Next thing I know it was

gonna be 2 or 3 years. And then what I would've been doing is just repeating the same cycle that had happened before.

Zoe

What keeps me going is the hope of having my own family and just showing them how I kept going and also giving back to the kids that was in foster care. I just feel like I need that degree to help them. It's that love. That love. I've been discouraged, but I had to remember why I was in school, and what I really want to do is work with foster children, so I had to fight through it. When I need motivate, I envision myself being somewhere, in the office. My thing is I don't always wanna be in this same position, so in order for me to get out of this situation, I'm gonna have to fight through.

I even thought about changing to psychology. I was thinking about changing my major, and then I was like, "No! That's not what I want to do!" And then I had people in my ear saying, "This is a hard degree to pursue," and how they were gonna go and do psychology. They were trying to give me an easier route. I just tell myself, "I'm gonna have to fight through. This is what I want." My ultimate goal is to work with foster children, so I just keep that in my head.

Analysis

This section demonstrates the importance of the self as a source of support for persistence in pursuing the long-term goal of earning a college degree for the women in this study. These women were their own cheerleaders, motivators, and supporters. As they explained in their interviews, the challenges that some of these women faced before and during their time in college were unimaginable, yet they managed to negotiate through and overcome them, a testament to their grit and determination.

Kayla's and Zoe's goal-driven attitudes especially exemplify grit as theorized by Duckworth (2016). As Duckworth (2016) explained, grit is a personality trait characterized by an intense passion for and sustained persistence toward achieving a long-term goal, which in this case is earning a college degree. As their experiences above demonstrate, these women engaged in supportive self-talk when the going got tough, and particularly with Kayla, developed an "I'll prove you wrong" attitude that helped her push through challenges.

Institutional Factors Supporting Persistence

Having a supportive campus environment and a sense of community is a strong defense against student attrition (Tinto, 1993). I was interested in learning what the institution provided to nontraditional students that helped them persist through college despite the challenges they faced. In talking to the women, I found that while they were able to identify some sources of faculty and staff support, they were quick to identify a wish list of items that they wish the institution would provide that would have helped them persist.

Amber

When I first got here, I met Ms. Brown. She registered me, and she was my advisor. She really, really helped me in my first year up until now. My first semester she told me "I want you to come see me now!" I say, "Okay." So, I would come see her once a week. I had never attended a university before! I was so happy I got to my dream school, and she helped me through everything—financial aid, money management, the environment and how to stay on track even though I was older. She mentored me, and she really helped me as far as giving me a view of how it's gonna be, what to avoid, what

not to avoid, and everything. She really, really helped me. Everything she said fell in line.

If I needed help, we do have tutoring, and I used that. In the past, the core classes was the difficult part. The rest of it is fine. I haven't had to go see a tutor since pre-cal. Core classes was hard. English, pre-cal, and biology—I had to go see tutors for all those three and algebra, of course. It really did help. Every resource I utilized. The math tutors was people majoring in math. You had a girl that was a senior in math, she helped me out. That really, really helped out. I don't know, without that, I'd probably be taking the class again. It really helped.

Debbie

[Dabny State] has a support system in place, but it just doesn't work. They have some support, but the people that they have in these places, they don't have the right attitude to help. They don't have the right attitude! I think it takes a certain type person that wanna help, have a helping spirit, not just somebody to fill a position. I don't need you challenging me what I'm asking you. You challenging me ain't helping me 'cause we gonna be here all day! I want to get out. You could be helping somebody else. And I realize everybody's on different levels, and I do understand that they can't go all the way back down to the bottom. I'm not saying that you have to tell me every little detail. You don't have time for that because you have all these students. But lead me in a direction where I can go research. Start me off! The biggest problem I have is with my writing because I'm still not sure about it, and I always say I'm gonna go back and just take time and go take a class on structured writing or whatever. But like one of my English

teachers told me, the only way you get better at writing, you just gotta keep writing. But it's okay.

My best experience here though was meeting some of the people that did help. I hold a value to that. That some people saw what I was doing, and they actually took time to help me. My lab person was very instrumental and to this day, I still have that research paper she helped me with—to the point where I look at it and I will always remember how a research paper is set up. I will never forget that. I kept that. Matter of fact, I asked the teacher to give it back, and he actually gave it back to me because I wanted to keep that.

The thing that I will say about [Dabny State], I know I complained the whole time, but you didn't really see the fruit until the end. I didn't get to see the fruit until the end. I went to Atlanta for my scholarship, and the alumni group is totally different than down south. I'm in this room with all these Black people with money and they're talking about we gotta educate our students! That's their main goal. And I, out of all the people in that department, received it. I was so humbled by that. I was really humbled by that. Even though it could have been better, I'm just thankful for the thought. The support that I got from my teachers for that, the things they said to me, and I'm like, "Really? Y'all never said that before! Why you saying it now? 'Cause I'm leaving?" If they would've said a little of that on the way, it would've helped me.

Maybe in that way, I never grew up. I feel like the Peter Pan syndrome. I never grew up. That validation, I needed that. I need to be validated. "Okay, you're doing good. Come on, let's go." Just a little of that and that's something that was missing. That's something that I never really got. Like I said, my daddy was the first person to say

that to me to give me hope. To give me hope like, “Come on. I need you to do this. I didn’t have this.” It was like an investment of words that he was putting into me. That’s where I learned to do that for my children and children that I worked with, “Come on. You can do this! You got this!”

I got that validation at [the local junior college]. I did. I had this one instructor at [Dabny State] that still do this red thing. All this. It’s so demeaning to me. I got all of these papers that I’ve gotten where teachers from [the local junior college] have written stuff, and they’re so positive in their writings. “You did a great job!” It’s elementary, but it works. That was just very helpful to me. When I had remediation at [the local junior college], the teacher would put our papers on the screen, and he would read them just like we wrote them. He would read it, and it was so funny! And you was like, “I wrote that?” And it’s like, “Yeah, that’s what you wrote, and I’m gonna read it just like you wrote it.” But when I went and took the writing test for the Regents, I passed it. All that time I’d been trying to pass one, and when I finally took him, I passed it!

That left an impression in my mind. I guess it’s how people feel. He fought for me. He really looked after me. After I passed it, I went back to him and I said, “Mr. West, I did it!” He’s like, “I knew you would.” And so, that was just how I felt. I just really felt like they was concerned about my education. When I got my award here, I went back to my teachers there to tell them and one teacher was like, “Debbie, I’m so proud of you. Oh, I got goosebumps! I am so proud of you.” I said, “I just wanted to let you know,” ‘cause they always told us, “When you all go get your bachelor’s it’s gonna be so much easier” because they taught us so much. I was always like, “Whey we gotta

know all this, we just getting an associate's!" But they put a lot in that time, and I just wanted her to know how much I appreciate it.

I tell everyone, "That was the fight." [The local junior college] was my foundation. It was everything. It was like that was my beginning of high school because that's what it was. I had to start all over again! I went through developmental studies. I started all over again. I had one Black teacher to tell me, "Well, Debbie, you didn't make it." It was some test we had to pass. And I said, "Well, that's okay. I'm just gonna stay here until I finish." I'm not gonna be in a hurry. And that's just always been degrading to me. I don't know why I feel that way. I don't know whether it's because of that teacher that I had in the sixth grade, but whenever someone says that to me, it bothers me 'cause it's like, "Well, you didn't do it," but they don't say that to me. But it's like I just expect to do it. I don't know. So that's my history. [The local junior college] will forever be in my heart. That's where I learned everything from. It mean it was a wonderful experience. It was wonderful! When I graduated from there, I stood outside by that fountain, I looked up, and I saw that little symbol where it started and all, and I felt a sense of accomplishment that I finished that college!

Shontae

I liked the fact that my program was a cohort model because it builds off of each semester, so if you don't get it in the first semester, you gonna have a problem in the second semester. It kinda builds off. If I had just picked classes, then they would've been all over the place, so I can appreciate the fact that they have us in quadrants that is specific to that semester, and the next semester builds off of that. I can appreciate that.

In my program, the majority of the students are nontraditional, but it's not set up for nontraditional students. Upon the interview, they say they don't want you to work because your classes are gonna take up so much of your time. The majority of nontraditional students have families, so it's kinda like you have to shuffle like, "What am I gonna do? Do I work to provide or do I go to school?" There's no night classes. Thinking about [the local junior college], they have classes that are night classes, which gives people the opportunity to work in the daytime. It's just more flexible for working people.

If the school wanted to help me out and reduce my stress, they should ensure that the person in the writing lab is effective, and they know what they're doing, that they're not just sitting there. Sometimes somebody's just sitting there, then nobody's in there, then just sitting there, then nobody's in there. If I did go to the writing lab when she was there, I didn't feel like I was able to get any assistance.

Then they put someone over there, and that made a big difference. When she got over there, then you see that writing lab is packed! You gotta try to get in there, catch Ms. Berry, and how that came about is word of mouth, "You should go to the writing lab, she's so helpful!" And now, it's packed because people feel like if I have a question, it's somebody that can answer the question. It's somebody that can break down what a bibliography is because I have no idea what it is! And like I say, sometimes I need to actually see stuff for it to make sense to me. I can read about it all day, but then when you have somebody that says—and I don't know if that's hand-feeding somebody or maybe babying somebody if you just taking out the time to just kinda explain it to them

or do they feel like, “Okay, you’re at this stage, and you don’t need anybody that’s just gonna break stuff down to you.”

You have to have somebody in there that’s willing to kinda explain stuff to people. As soon as that person left, that writing lab became a ghost town. I had been there the other two semesters before she got there and then that one semester she was there, but I had never seen that many people in the writing lab just coming in and out, whether they getting assistance or not. It’s just like, “Okay, I know where I can go if I have a question.” It really bridged a gap because had she not been there, it was just like, “I hope I’m doing the right thing. I’m just gonna turn it in and pray and ask the Lord.”

In my program, you don’t get tutored from other people. It would’ve helped, but it would’ve been questions about assignments opposed to questions about material. “I’m writing a research paper for another class, so how do I do a literature review?” But see, the professors would be the ones that would kinda guide the tutoring, and sometimes you ask a question and they just feel like you need to figure it out, but they don’t want you to go outside of the program to get any tutoring. They tell you, “Don’t even waste your time going over there because you need to get it from us,” but the tutoring is not so much about the information, it’s about the assignments. I can read the material, and I can understand the information, but how to write a paper analyzing it?

Examples would be a good way for us to see how it’s supposed to actually flow. That’s how we do kinda like undercover like, “Let me see . . . shhh.” We’re meeting in the hall just to kinda get an example of what needs to go where because 9 times out of 10, my topic won’t be your topic and knowing that somebody’s gonna read it, I just don’t wanna get tangled up in nothing. I need an example to know how it’s supposed to

actually flow. The example would be awesome, but then an example with an explanation could've produced some amazing work. Like, "Okay, I have an example of a literature review, but now can you explain it to me? Or how you gotta reference the author?" Just that kinda stuff would've make it like, "Okay, yeah I see what I'm supposed to do with it." They're probably worried that if they give us an example, it would've limited us and we would've just copied it, but then you walk in, and it's, "Huh?"

We have two intro classes, so in between those two it could one day of "This is what this is." Like a boot camp, "This is what this is," and just outline that kinda stuff. It's like asking for an example is just cursing them out in a sense. Like, "You need an example?" Just an example! You know what I'm saying? You could write it about Hickory, Dickory, Dock! Just can I get an example? Just so I can see what it is that you want. But it's like it's just so frowned upon! And the thing about that, they could do like a webinar, and you could just go back and watch it whenever you want to watch it just to explain everything. Just kinda walk you through—print this out, and then once you print it out, we can just walk you through, tell you what it is and all that. Or even maybe there can just be a general webinar that just kinda explains what APA is, how to write a paper in APA, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, all just kinda simplified. They can print it out and just go along with it like, "Okay, this is what this part needs."

Zoe

Examples of what I'm supposed to do, that's all I need! And then just follow the syllabus, what their requirements are, and then I'd just try to put both together some kind of way. I just need an example of what it's supposed to look like. That's how it's supposed to be. They don't really teach, they facilitate. They're not teachers who went

to school for education and learned how to teach. These are just people in the community who are teaching their experience, and they're trying to teach what's in the book but no, they don't know how to teach.

Going into it, I did not know that they were going to be facilitators. I figured it out later. I was expecting teaching. Just teaching us certain things instead of saying, "Okay, refer back to the book and try to find it." You could read that book 50 times, and you still won't understand unless somebody can really teach it to you so that it can stick in your mind 'cause reading sometimes just flows somewhere else.

One semester, I was going through it. I was just very emotional. I even left class once or twice. I went and saw my professor in her office. We were talking about it, and she was like, "Well if it's too much, then you need to go down to part-time." And I was just like, "Well dang." She should not bring me down because I was already down with the grades I was making. She should know how to talk to people. She was just like, "Drop down." I was like, "You know how hard I work to even get where I am. You know if I do that then I will be in school longer and that's more money!" It was just not what I wanted to hear. She said that, and I was just like, "I really gotta do this for me. Nobody's really here for me. They say they are, but they're not."

The best thing that was here was when we had Ms. Berry in the writing lab. It was nice just having someone to connect with, and there were other people that would come—the same people. We learned how to network and connect, and just having someone to build a support team is very vital to being successful. That really helped me in the beginning. I wish they would bring that back. We just need more people who are supportive, who are genuine. Now we do have some people who are in that writing lab,

but they don't care. I don't know how it is now, but when Ms. Berry left, it was somebody in there, but she just couldn't connect. Her attitude, I just couldn't vibe with that. Just having somebody who was genuine, who really wants to see you do well, somebody to talk to—that's important to me, and that helps you get to the next stage. That was missing once Ms. Berry left. In the beginning it was good, but once Ms. Berry left, it was just like I felt left. I felt alone. It was hard! It was. It was hard. It was hard.

Analysis

Amber, Debbie, Shontae, and Zoe all took advantage of institutional support services during their time at Dabny State University. Collectively, they mentioned academic advising, tutoring, writing labs, recognition and validation, and the cohort model as support services that helped them overcome obstacles and persist through challenges as students.

Amber found value in math and science tutoring services on campus. Shontae indicated that major-specific tutoring would have been useful for her. Debbie, Shontae, and Zoe credited a specific staff member in the writing lab with helping them persist through the challenge of academic writing. As part of my document analysis, I reviewed the publications relative to the tutoring services on campus, which are now limited to only writing and math. The centers are open daily during regular business hours, which would preclude those who work in the daytime from visiting. Online centers now exist and they provide webinars on a few different writing topics, which is something Shontae wished for, but the times and selection of topics are quite limited. The university now also provides peer tutoring, and the hours are more accommodating for nontraditional students by extending into the evening hours. Faculty tutors are also available, but only

for a couple hours in the afternoon. These tutoring services cover a larger array of academic areas, to include Spanish, math, English, science, accounting, history, and government.

Conclusions

When considering the experiences at Dabny State University across participants, several similarities emerged. First, the women all had multiple, competing obligations. The women in this study do more than just attend school. School is very important to them, but it shares a space in their lives alongside family, work, and other roles and responsibilities. Second, the women indicate a deep, personal connection between their life experiences and their chosen major. All but Shaquita point to life experiences as inspirations behind their choice of major. Unsurprisingly, Shaquita was the only one who described an intense disinterest in her program. Next, the women perceived themselves as a maternal figure in their classes among their traditional counterparts. They described younger students looking up to them and seeking advice or help. Also, the women described disappointment in the level of rigor and quality of education in terms of the work they were assigned and the expectations their instructors had for them. They expressed the desire to be properly prepared by experts in the field to be successful in their career and believe that rigor and high expectations are necessary. They also felt frustration with “the runaround.” At some point during their matriculation, usually at the beginning and sometimes at various phases throughout, the women expressed frustration with getting “the runaround” from administrative offices on campus. Finally, all of the women recalled a better experience at their previous, predominately-white institution.

Their fond recollections from their transfer institutions juxtaposed in their stories against their more negatively recalled experiences at Dabny State University.

These portions of the interviews almost seemed cathartic or therapeutic to the women who participated. In fact, Debbie once told me that she felt a sense of relief to get all of her grievances out in her interviews. Older minority women like those in the present study are often socialized to be passive and quiet, precluding them from sharing experience like that they had with various faculty, staff, and administrative offices on campus (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Dabny State University could learn a lot about their students' experiences by holding regular focus groups and repeated conversations with various constituencies on campus.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Study

This study used narrative analysis designed within the theoretical frameworks of critical race feminism (CRF) and Black feminist thought (BFT) to examine the ways six Black reentry women made meaning of their lived experiences as students at an Historically Black University (HBCU) in the southeastern United States. Interviews served as the primary source of data and were supplemented by field observations and analysis of various documents. Data were analyzed thematically using categorizing and connecting strategies. The resulting report became a narrative that collectively told the women's stories while maintaining their unique contexts and meaning-making, and serves as a powerful counter-narrative to persistent negative stereotypes about Black women. The findings indicate that despite their many challenges as students, Black reentry women are quite committed to their education, and that commitment allows them to overcome the challenges. Although they were successful in their recent educational pursuit to earn an undergraduate degree, they felt largely unsupported and uncomfortable in the HBCU.

Ultimately, I successfully answered the four overarching research questions that guided my study. Chapter IV covers my first research question: What experiences and values influenced Black female nontraditional students to enroll and persist at an Historically Black University in the Southeast? I found that hardships, marginalization,

and other barriers delayed my participants' traditional matriculation into college. Various experiences and values eventually led to their reentry. The experiences leading to reentry fell into the categories of outside encouragement, coping with challenges, and life's critical moments, and the values fell into the categories of being a role model, having a career, and having an education. When the women in the present study decided to reenter at an HBCU, their decision was driven by a family connection to the school and/or convenience, rather than the school's status as an HBCU. Once admitted, the women selected their major based on their past life experiences, present job situation, and future career goals.

Chapter 4 contains the answers to the remaining three research questions. The women's perspectives and insights into their reentry experiences helped me answer the second research question, "How do Black female nontraditional students experience the campus culture at an Historically Black University in the Southeast?" The women clearly identified a variety of challenges that they had to overcome as students, which I categorized into institutional barriers and interrole conflict. It seems they had little institutional support in overcoming those barriers and minimizing the effects of that conflict, and instead, they mostly relied on an internal locus of support that allowed them to persist in college.

Interestingly, I concluded that the third question, "What components of the Historically Black University do Black female nontraditional students consider responsive to their social needs?" does not apply to the women who participated in the present study. These women were not looking to find or occupy a social space in college. At this point in their lives, they were interested only in receiving their education and

using it to enter into or advance their current career. Despite the lack of intention in finding a social space, the women did find ways to fit in socially on campus by helping each other and serving as informal mentors and assuming a maternal role with younger classmates.

Finally, the stories the women relayed in their interviews allowed me to answer the fourth research question, “What types of instructional methods, course offerings, and campus programs do Black female nontraditional students consider most responsive to their academic needs?” As serious-minded students, the women were quite clear on the ways the school adequately met (or could have better met) their academic needs. They mostly lamented on their instructors’ teaching styles, sequencing of and gaps in curricula, and availability of academic support systems. I considered the answers to my research questions within the theoretical constructs of Black feminism and Critical race feminism in reaching the conclusions of my study.

Conclusions from a Critical Race and Black Feminist Perspective

In this study, I combined Black feminist thought with critical race feminism to construct my theoretical framework. BFT uses Black women’s voices to empower them and put them at the center of analysis (Collins, 2009). CRF is an outgrowth of critical race theory (CRT), which uses counter-narratives in an effort to reduce or eliminate racial disparities by combating racism and inequalities. CRT is inherently feminist because the use of counter-narratives allows traditionally marginalized women of color to use their personal stories to define their realities and experiences and use those as powerful alternatives to stereotypical representations of Black women (Collins, 2009). These

theoretical frameworks guided me as I conceptualized and carried out my study, and also informed my decisions as I analyzed and presented the data for this report.

For this study, I spent many hours interviewing six Black female nontraditional students, followed by countless hours of listening to and then reading and rereading the interview transcripts to analyze and examine the ways my participants made meaning of their lived experiences at the HBCU. The final presentation of the data privileges the voices of my participants by using their words to present their collective experiences while maintaining the individual contexts of their meaning-making, all of which are important tenets of critical race feminism (Wing, 1997) and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009).

Throughout American history, Black women have had to live in a way that resists negative stereotypes that the dominant culture has perpetuated about them, such as the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the angry Black woman (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). The counter-narratives contained in this report and the knowledge that will invariably result from them are an important rejection of stereotypes and persistent negative images about Black women. The findings from this study suggest that the Black women who participated, though they may have lacked sufficient familial and institutional support systems, used determination and an internal source of strength and self-support to persist through difficult challenges and achieve their goal of earning a college degree.

Furthermore, the knowledge and counter-narratives produced in this study show that the Black women who participated were quite driven by the goal of attaining a self-sustaining career at the culmination of their undergraduate studies. The role that having a

career played on the women in this study absolutely cannot be understated. For those participants who did enter a career during the course of this study, their self-image and self-definition were dramatically improved.

Because a college education led to a career, and a career improved the women's self-images, self-concepts, and self-definitions, Dabny State University clearly played an important role on the emergence of all three. Noting the documented power of HBCUs to promote self-development for Black students, Berger and Milem (2000) measured and successfully demonstrated the positive effect that the educational environments of church-affiliated HBCUs had on students' self-concepts. In their study, structured and meaningful interaction with faculty and peers, and involvement in clubs and organizations contributed to increased self-concept development among Black HBCU students (Berger & Milem, 2000). Although not church-affiliated, as a public HBCU, Dabny State University is in an excellent position to continue to propel these women, and others like them, past persistent negative stereotypes by providing a comfortable and supportive space for the women to earn a college degree and build their self-concepts, thus allowing them to use their lives as a counter-narrative to resist the dominant narrative about them.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation for this study was the timing of the project. The data analysis phase of the project took place at the exact time that the university underwent a contentious and unpopular consolidation with a regional state college in the same city. Combining two institutions is always a difficult process, but the challenges of a consolidation were compounded in this case by the racial demographic of the two schools

in a region where racial differences are still a source of contention. While the women in this study did not comment much on the consolidation in their interviews and many of the experiences they described took place pre-consolidation, the overall mood of students at the time of this project was disappointment in the impact of the consolidation on the quality of customer service, instruction, and campus services. This present context may have impacted how these women made meaning of past experiences.

Another limitation to my study stems from the nature of qualitative research in and of itself. An inherent part of qualitative research is that the researcher is deeply involved in the data collection and analysis. Although I acknowledged my biases and included validity checks to negate their effects, it is entirely possible that I unconsciously allowed my biases to affect the way I collected, analyzed, interpreted, and presented data in this report.

Finally, the fact that I am doing cross-cultural research could be considered a limitation to the present study. My positionality as a White woman employed as an administrator at the institution where the study took place could have unknowingly affected my interpretation of the data and how I chose to present it. Furthermore, because I am White and have never attended an HBCU as a student, it is impossible for me to completely understand the meaning these women made of their experiences, though I made it my goal to present as much of the narrative in their words as possible and allow them to check the interpretations I had of their meaning-making.

Implications of the Study

There are several important implications from this study. The first and most important implication is that the Black reentry women who participated in my study, in

the face of countless barriers and formidable challenges, are incredibly committed to their education and quite determined to achieve their goal of earning an undergraduate degree. Second, the women in my study are more comfortable when in classes with other nontraditional women. Furthermore, these six Black nontraditional women students do not engage in campus life or extracurricular activities, which precludes feelings of comfort in the short term and possibly alumni support in the long term. Next, they appreciate rigor in their coursework and structured pedagogy from their instructors but believed this school did not have the support structures in place to bridge gaps between their preparation, or lack thereof, and a demanding curriculum. Finally, and most notably, the Black nontraditional women in my study have high expectations for efficiency, immediacy, and professionalism from faculty and staff and have been largely underwhelmed by what they have received at this HBCU. Leaving the institution with a collectively bad experience has negative implications not only for the women in terms of self-image and satisfaction, but for the institution as well. Satisfied and gainfully employed graduates are a major source of recruitment and financial support for the institution over the long term. Dissatisfied and underemployed graduates can have a damaging impact on enrollment and endowments.

As mentioned earlier, Dabny State University ranks as the ninth from the bottom of the nation's 106 HBCUs for endowments (Toldson & Cooper, 2014). This is part of a cyclical trend that Stodghill (2015) remarked on in his book about HBCUs, which he considers to be at their breaking point:

For better or worse, HBCUs are merely institutional reflections of the people they were built to serve, their fortunes a bellwether for the state of the race. The

cyclical impact, perhaps oversimplified, of black colleges and their effect on the culture may go something like this: the cumulative effect of African Americans' inability to generate real personal or institutional wealth over time has, among other things, resulted in black colleges lacking a dedicated pool of alumni or corporate wealth to tap for large financial gifts and endowments. Weak endowments at black colleges make education less affordable by driving up tuition costs, creating a generation of black people unprepared for the job market. (p. 9)

Here, Stodghill (2015) neglects to mention the root cause of African Americans' inability to accumulate wealth over time, and his silence seems to suggest that African Americans are to blame. This deficit perspective fails to account for the fact that, historically, systemic embedded racism has prevented Blacks from accumulating personal and generational wealth in the United States (Thompson, 2018). It may be that those African Americans who have accumulated wealth still do not contribute to their alma maters because they fail to find value in the institution, an idea that Stodghill (2015) explores in his book.

Stodghill (2015) blamed a lack of accountability for one of the reasons HBCUs are waning, arguing that failing HBCUs tend to blame others rather than do the work to fix themselves. Here he reiterated the importance of alumni donations again:

HBCUs boast two million living alumni; if two million graduates pledged even a hundred dollars a year, HBCUs could build endowments all over the country. But for some reason, blacks refuse to fund our own schools. (p. 119)

According to Stodghill (2015), a lack of value in the institution serves as a root cause for the lack of alumni support. A solution to these “tightened purse strings” is to ensure that students leave “so pleased by their experience” that they will make contributions to the university over the course of their career after they leave (Stodghill, 2015, p. 153). I found that collectively, the women in my study left the university displeased with their experience and did not seem to find value in the HBCU, certainly not characteristic of the students who would be most likely to write checks to the university as alumni. Because of the already precarious and worsening financial situation resulting from low and continuously declining enrollment, little alumni support, and lack of endowments, Dabny State University needs alumni who will make financial contributions; therefore, working to ensure that students leave pleased with their experience and with a sense of value in the institution is critical.

Much of what the women experienced at Dabny State University was described in the context of comparison with a previously attended college. Oftentimes, the experiences at the prior institution were remembered more fondly than the experiences at Dabny State. Their juxtaposition of their prior colleges against Dabny State served to highlight the inefficiencies they saw in nonacademic services, quality of instruction, and rigor of the curriculum. When designing campus support services for academic and social needs, Dabny State should consider the support services offered at other higher education institutions and consider local implementation. This should be fairly simple for Dabny State as it recently consolidated with its nearby competitor. As Debbie pointed out, “Now that this school and [the local junior college] have merged, we should have the same support that the 2-year institution had.”

Because all of the women in this study started out at smaller colleges before transferring into the HBCU, the university would benefit from forming strategic partnerships with junior and technical colleges to streamline the process, and ensure a seamless transition from one college to another. Additionally, the university should implement targeted marketing campaigns and recruitment events at these schools to recruit more nontraditional women to the HBCU. Finally, because nontraditional women indicate feelings of intimidation, the university could send faculty members to recruiting events with the purpose of humanizing the faculty, which may help potential students feel less intimidated.

The implications from this study demonstrate the need for Dabny State University to consider the ways it can successfully support Black female nontraditional students by examining the narratives and lived experiences of a population of students it routinely ignores when designing programs, services, and curriculum. I have offered suggestions for several opportunities for the university to improve the overall experience for its nontraditional female students based on recommendations from my participants and conclusions from this study. These recommendations include nontraditional learning communities, targeted academic support services, and sensitivity to or consideration of the whole self.

Nontraditional learning communities

As this study demonstrates, Black female nontraditional women tend to migrate to those who are like them, and that provides a source of comfort and support within the classroom where they may otherwise feel out of place and uncomfortable. Johnson-Bailey's (2001) findings supported this: "When reentry women share the same

classrooms or programs, they find and support each other” (p. 92). Johnson-Bailey (2001) described some of the ways that postsecondary institutions have responded to this proclivity of reentry women, but most of the things she described were non-academic. It is important to join these women together in academic spaces as well.

In describing the usual student experience at universities, Tinto (2003) used words like “isolated,” “disconnected,” “detached,” and “unrelated,” and called for the integration of learning communities in universities (p. 1). Tinto (2003) was referring to the innovation at some institutions whereby traditional freshmen have an opportunity to join purposefully formed learning communities based on their major or meta-major. These types of learning communities place students into the same course sections so the students move through many of the same classes together over the course of their matriculation. Tinto (2003) concluded that these strategically created learning communities were effective in improving learning and persistence among university students. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) later found that learning communities also gave low-income students, who often lacked confidence in their learning abilities and the motivation to succeed, “a safe and supportive place to learn” where they flourished and persisted as students (p. 12).

Dabny State University could make a similar option available for nontraditional students. Shontae moved through a cohort in her program that was coincidentally largely comprised of nontraditional students. In commenting on her comfort at the school, she said, “When I got into my program, I was more comfortable because the majority of the people in that program are nontraditional.” Zoe echoed those sentiments when she said,

“When I got in my quadrant, it was mostly older women . . . We took all our major classes together, and I liked that.”

Not only do nontraditional learning communities bring like students together in academic spaces, but they also provide some structure to scheduling. As Debbie explained,

I think the cohort model could be good. The good thing about it is it made scheduling easier because we didn't have to worry about going through all the stuff other people went through 'cause your schedule was already made for you. That was the positive thing. We didn't have to go stand in line. It was good 'cause your schedule was already made.

An important caveat to this is that the institution should also ensure that these cohorts are available with daytime, online, or evening options to accommodate students fulfilling multiple roles.

Targeted Academic Support Services

As Tinto (1993) originally pointed out in his seminal work on student attrition, providing academic and other support to adult students is a critical component of adult student retention. In addition to innovations like learning communities (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2003), institutions should divert resources to other initiatives that may enhance student persistence and success (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) stressed the importance of placing these programs in the mainstream of institutional life, rather than relegating them to the margins and diminishing their effectiveness.

Extending upon the idea that the institution plays a critical role in student retention, Thomas (2001) wrote, “Higher education institutions must have the appropriate

resources to provide a supportive learning environment for all students, irrespective of race, ethnicity, and other sociodemographic factors” (p. 140). Debbie very clearly articulated the need for targeted academic support services at the HBCU when she said:

If this school wanted to be a better place for students like me, they need to care more about their nontraditional students and provide the services that they need to be successful. They need good labs because you gotta remember, a lot of us have been out of school for so long, even if we make it this far, it’s still skills that we’re short. They need resources labs that they can actually go in and to have people to help them with different things and not feel like, “Well, you’re in college, and you don’t know how to do that?”

Several of the women in my study mentioned the benefit and necessity of a properly staffed writing lab because writing was one of their academic weaknesses. A writing lab and other tutoring centers that can help nontraditional students bridge the gap between foundational knowledge and the more challenging concepts and applications at the college level would be hugely beneficial for these students. Those who staff the labs or centers should be able to diagnose and remediate learners, and have the recipe for what the academic instructors are expecting their students to do. Specific writing tutorials that have synchronous or asynchronous meetings could also benefit women whose schedules and responsibilities outside of school prevent them from frequenting the on-campus writing labs for support. Importantly, as Tinto (2006) points out, if student affairs professionals create and staff support services like writing labs and tutoring centers, some allocation of faculty time should be dedicated to enhancing the services that these centers provide.

The institution could provide additional support by making academic support services available outside of traditional hours so that students who work during the day are able to take advantage of the services during the evening hours or on weekends. Again, a supportive environment breeds retention (Tinto, 1993, 2006). As Thomas (2001) pointed out, “flexibility in . . . administrative hours is one way to make colleges and universities more supportive and accessible for reentry college women (p. 153).” While the women in this study were not able to take advantage of all support services because of lack of availability or staffing issues, they were able to form a network with their peers as a solution. The cohort model in one program at the institution was useful in helping some of the women in this study cultivate this network of peers.

Finally, for women who may not be able to independently pinpoint their career passion, the institution could facilitate such exploration by providing an interest inventory designed to help students select a major most appropriate for their individual interests and passions. This is important because interested students tend to be successful in their courses, which makes them more likely to persist, graduate, and enter their in-field careers.

Consideration of and Support for the Whole Self

Large numbers of students are entering the 21st century higher education environment having multiple and indivisible identities, representing various sociodemographic backgrounds, and fulfilling numerous and competing roles in their everyday lives. As the demographics of Dabny State University demonstrate, the diversity of the student body is increasing. The findings from this study suggest that Dabny State should diversify itself to match the increasing diversity of its student body.

To do so, the institution should view students in light of their whole selves, rather than just seeing them myopically as just students.

The women in the present study concomitantly fulfilled multiple and competing roles, including mother, daughter, sibling, friend, employee, and student. Often the demands of each role interfered with others and caused conflict in the women's lives. The institution's failure to recognize and provide supports that would negate or minimize the effects of nontraditional students trying to fulfill multiple roles makes their lives as college students all the more difficult. As Shontae explained:

It's definitely difficult to have a job, especially when the assignments were all due at the same time. I can see how [the professors] prefer you not to work, but I think one downside to people that go from high school directly to college and have all these accolades, they don't understand all the hurdles that nontraditional students have to face. [The professors] went straight from high school to college to getting their master's and Ph.D. and all. They went the correct way, and they don't understand how it is having a family. They don't understand that you have kids, and once you sign onto these classes, they feel like that's your life. I don't think it was fair for them to do that. I think the professors have to be realistic about what the nontraditional student has to do outside of school. What else after I leave campus? Just attempt to be understanding. Although we're still adults, we still have a whole lot of other stuff going on in our lives opposed to just school work. And like they say, "You chose to come to school," and all of that—that's understandable, but I think they just kinda forget that we have some other stuff that takes precedence over school.

The institution can help foster the success of its nontraditional female students by taking their multiple and indivisible roles into consideration when deciding course offerings, designing curricula and instruction, and interacting with students. Additionally, the institution could foster a supportive learning environment by creating ways for nontraditional women students to mentor the younger ones. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the inclination of the women in this study was to use their helpful and generous nature to serve as mentors or maternal figures to younger students. With a lack of programs or campus life activities designed for nontraditional women students, Dabny State University has an opportunity to create opportunities within courses or in the mainstream of campus life that will be mutually beneficial to older and younger students alike by bringing them together in mentorships. Nontraditional women bring with them to school a wealth of life experiences and oftentimes a willingness to provide advice and support to their traditional counterparts.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study uncovered unique challenges that Black female nontraditional women face in the educational space of the HBCU. Future research could focus on the grit among Black female nontraditional students like the women in my study who persisted against all odds, barriers, and challenges to achieve their goal of earning a college degree. Additionally, because this is the only study I know of that focused exclusively on Black reentry women at an HBCU, additional studies focusing on the same population of students at the same setting would add depth to the existing literature.

Furthermore, considering that each of my participants transferred to the HBCU and used their prior college experiences to contrast their HBCU experiences, future

research with participants who only attended and graduated from a single institution would help eliminate this comparative lens. I would also recommend in future research that studies of this sort be conducted by individuals who, unlike me, are not so intimately tied to the institution being studied, and who may be of a different race or gender than myself.

Finally, as I mentioned in the report, perhaps the most surprising finding in the present study was that none of my Black female participants chose to attend this school because it is historically Black. Working in enrollment management at this school, I know that Dabny State University strongly relies on its identity as an HBCU in recruiting students and employees, designing curricula, and structuring campus life programs. While I am unable to generalize my findings in this study to the wider population of students, or even to other Black female nontraditional students, it is worth noting that the school being an HBCU had nothing to do with why these particular Black women chose to attend college here. I have not read any studies that specifically focus on Black reentry women who attend an HBCU; therefore, these findings are a new contribution to the literature on these women and have the potential for further exploration. Future research could explore that further with other Black female nontraditional students as this would help inform HBCUs on why these women choose to attend, thus allowing them to better design their recruitment and marketing campaigns to target a wider audience.

Conclusion

HBCUs, especially those experiencing the declining enrollment, low graduation rates, and financial crises that are currently besetting the HBCU that served as the setting for this study, should take immediate action to recruit, retain, and graduate more students

if they are to survive and thrive in the 21st century environment of higher education. This action requires a deep and complex understanding of the students served at the university. Especially for the HBCU, literature that marginalizes or renders invisible diverse students in favor of White middle-class students cannot inform faculty and staff about the needs and experiences of its students. Without that deep understanding, faculty and staff cannot develop the cultural competence necessary to create the responsive curricula, programs, and services to facilitate the matriculation experiences of diverse cohorts of students.

Though typically not a majority of the student population, Black female nontraditional students are a noticeable and growing contingent on HBCU campuses. The academic needs and matriculation experiences of these students cannot be ignored if university faculty and staff are to help these often academically vulnerable students succeed and meet their goals. Unfortunately, these students in particular are largely invisible in the existing scholarship on college students, which means faculty and staff do not have access to the information necessary to facilitate deep understanding of this constituency.

More specifically and most importantly, existing scholarship does not fully explore the experiences of academically vulnerable Black female nontraditional students who attend HBCUs. A lack of understanding regarding their experiences at this specific setting precludes faculty, staff, and administrators from developing the cultural competence necessary to effectively create and maintain a comfortable, welcoming HBCU campus environment for Black female nontraditional students. Furthermore, this lack of understanding stunts the ability to recruit, retain, and graduate diverse students.

Continuously declining enrollment and low graduation numbers, combined with students' perception of an unwelcoming campus climate, can be detrimental to the long-term health and sustainability of the university.

The present study filled a gap in the literature on Black female nontraditional students by exploring their experiences while attending a public HBCU in Southwest Georgia, a setting previously unexplored in existing scholarship. In addition to focusing exclusively on Black female nontraditional students, the study accounted for the within-group diversity that exists in this population of students. This focus on Black women while accounting for within-group diversity addressed a gap that Winkle-Wagner (2015) recently identified as existing in the literature and fulfills a core tenet of Black feminist thought.

Black women use their lives to resist the dominant narrative that insists on negative stereotypes and images (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). By using narrative analysis complemented by the theoretical lenses of critical race feminism and Black feminist thought, I considered the unique challenges for Black women in American society and privileged the voices of my participants. This privileging is important because by and large, these women are members of a larger population whose voices and experiences have been at best marginalized and at worst silenced in the literature. Oftentimes, Black women are essentialized to have the same or similar experiences as White women, but studies show that challenges related to attending college as nontraditional students are “magnified” for Black women, so focusing exclusively on Black women is important if researchers are to truly understand their plight (Thomas, 2001, p. 152).

The presentation of data in this report maintained the context of the participants' individual stories while constructing a coherent narrative that connects patterns across and also highlights differences between participants' stories. The exclusive focus on Black women and the privileging of their voices as they relay stories of their lived experiences at Dabny State University allowed me to systematically answer my research questions in a way that maintained the integrity of my theoretical frameworks and allowed me to achieve my research goals.

Following the demographic profile chart that Johnson-Bailey (2001) created for the women in her study, I replicated the chart (see Appendix I) so that I could compare information across participants. What immediately stood out to me was that all of my participants hail from a rural poor to a working class background. Being at the intersection of Black, female, and poor or working class puts these women in a unique place in American society where each of these statuses are a cause for marginalization. As Johnson-Bailey (2001) pointed out, "The place of Black women in the general population translates into an inability to acquire power and privilege" (p. 103).

For the women in my study, college was their ticket to acquiring that elusive power and privilege, which they planned to attain by having a career after graduation. Although all of the women held jobs prior to, and for some during their matriculation, none considered themselves careered or professionals, but they expressed a longing for a career that required a college degree. Trends in the 21st century higher education environment indicate that more diverse women like the ones in my study are filling college classrooms as they make personal and career decisions over the course of their lives that necessitate a return to college (Thomas, 2001).

As the present and other studies demonstrate, an intentional and systemic restructuring of the institution to be more reflective and responsive to diverse students is warranted. Thomas's (2001) conclusions, drawn 17 years ago are, as demonstrated in this study, still true today:

It is increasingly clear that the college environment must be reframed to be more contextually relevant and responsive to the needs of diverse students—many of whom are older, full-time employees, African American, and female. To transform the chilly climate of institutions of higher education for many older women and students of color, a restructuring of the traditional undergraduate curriculum must take place. This transformation should result in an environment that is visibly more multicultural as well as one that is more gender- and age-sensitive. (p. 153)

Creating a climate that is inclusive of and responsive to people from various ethnic, racial, linguistic, and sociodemographic backgrounds will not only benefit the institution and its students, but those benefits will echo into the students' families and communities as well.

EPILOGUE

The process of conducting this study, analyzing the data, and writing this dissertation was a life-changing experience for me, and it has altered my worldview as an educator and as a person. I became a better communicator, most importantly in cross-racial and cross-generational dialogue, from reflecting on the conversations I had during the data collection phase of this study. I learned how to ask questions and make statements that open communication in a conversation. Above all else, this study reminds me that all students are unique, and no matter how homogenous a group of students may seem, they are all truly diverse. Perhaps the most obvious and immediate effects of what I learned in this study involve my practice as an administrator for the second largest program of its kind in the state of Georgia.

Since writing and defending this dissertation, I relocated to the greater Atlanta area after accepting a position as a dean for an adult education program at a metropolitan state technical college, where the lessons I learned from my study have informed my practice as an administrator. In working with my current population of students, I am often reminded of the women who participated in my study, and I am able to transfer some of the findings from my study to some of the students and situations at my current location.

For example, many of the students in my program have dreams of attending a university, but like some of the women in my study, they may lack the confidence to do so; therefore, they use experiences at a technical college to “get their feet wet” in a safe educational space. This demonstrates the potential transformative effect that small, local colleges can have on nontraditional students. Considering this, I formulated a vision for

my program that centers on its transformative power, and prioritized seamless transitional services as one of my main goals.

Additionally, I learned from this study the barriers that bad customer service creates that can impinge upon a smooth matriculation process. While the women in my study persisted despite the institutional barriers that included bad customer service, their experience at the school would have been vastly better if customer service were improved. In my current practice, I implemented strategies to monitor and improve customer service. In the short time I have been in my position, I designed and administered a survey instrument to get a pulse on the service that the leadership team provides to the faculty and staff within the department. I am now designing a survey that we will distribute to students to determine their perspectives on the program and the faculty and staff within it. Results from these surveys will inform the development of in-house professional development initiatives or the selection of external trainings on the importance of providing good customer service and strategies to achieve the same.

Finally, as dean of my program, I endeavor to create a culture of positivity toward each other, our students, and our careers; inclusiveness toward and appreciation for diverse people and cultures; and excitement about the transformative power of our program in the lives of our students and their families. The idea for this kind of culture was absolutely informed by the lessons that this study, and the women who participated in it, taught me.

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Appendix A

Interview 1 Protocol – Life History

Tell me about yourself.

Describe your early schooling experiences.

- Support systems
- Good and bad experiences
- Parental involvement
- Extracurricular activities
- Type of school (demographics)

What is your family's education background?

- Parents' and siblings' education level
- First-generation college student

Explain your decision to go to college.

What led you to choose an HBCU?

Appendix B

Interview 2 Protocol – Matriculation Experiences

Tell me about your experiences when starting school.

- Application
- Enrollment
- Registration

What is your favorite aspect about attending an HBCU? Least?

Describe your typical school day.

Describe the campus culture. What is it like attending [Dabny] State? How do you see yourself fitting in on campus?

Describe your best and worst experiences at [Dabny] State.

Have you ever considered withdrawing?

Appendix C

Interview 3 Protocol – Meaning-Making

How could faculty and staff at [Dabny] State make the initial process smoother for you as a nontraditional student?

- Application
- Enrollment
- Registration

How could faculty and staff at [Dabny] State make the schooling process smoother for you as a nontraditional student?

- Instruction
- Support
- Campus programs and services

What can the institution do for you as a nontraditional student to reduce stress related to school?

Appendix D

Valdosta State University IRB Application

Valdosta State University

APPLICATION FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

EXEMPT APPLICATION

INSTRUCTIONS: Complete all required information, and check appropriate boxes. Attach all CITI training documents, answers to questions 12–15, and obtain all required signatures before submitting to the Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration.

Project Title: The Lived Experiences of Black Female Nontraditional HBCU Students

Project Dates: 11/15/2016 to 11/14/2017
MM/DD/YYYY MM/DD/YYYY

Responsible Researcher: Meghan R. McBride
Mailing Address: 105 Dogleg Drive
Department: Curriculum & Instruction
Email: mrmcbride@valdosta.edu; meghan.mcbride@valdosta.edu
Telephone: 229.891.4723

Minimum # of Participants: 5
Maximum # of Participants: 15
External Funding: Yes No
If Yes, Sponsor:

(Note: If research will be externally funded, include a copy of the proposal or award that describes use of human participants.)

Supervising Faculty: Richard Schmertzing (VSU); Melvin Shelton (VSU)
Supervising Faculty Email: rwschmer@valdosta.edu; melvin.shelton@valdosta.edu

- VSU Status:
- FT/PT Faculty
 - Adjunct Faculty
 - Research Associate
 - Administrator/Staff Member
 - Graduate Student
 - Doctoral Dissertation
 - Master's Thesis
 - Undergraduate Student
 - Senior Project
 - Unaffiliated Investigator

Co-Investigator	Institutional Affiliation	Email Address	*IRB FWA #

Note: Unaffiliated Investigators must fill out the last column IRB FWA # and complete the Unaffiliated Agreement form at the link below:
<http://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php>

1. YES NO Does your proposed study (a) meet the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board definition of research (as cited below) or (b) does it involve a condition for IRB oversight as listed below?

VSU IRB Definition of Research: Valdosta State University describes research as a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

Conditions: The following conditions may not meet the definition of "research" as provided above, but will cause your research to be subject to IRB oversight:

- Intent to produce results that will be submitted for peer-reviewed publication or presentation
- Include minors (e.g. those under the age of 18)
- Target potentially vulnerable individuals
- May place pregnant women and/or fetuses at risk of physical harm
- Deal with a topic of sensitive nature in a way which anonymity cannot be sustained
- Involve any activity that places the participants at more than minimal risk (see Question 9 for definition of "minimal risk")

2. YES NO Are the human participants in your study living individuals?

3. YES NO Are you collecting information about deceased persons that may put third parties (i.e., surviving spouses and/or living descendants) at more than minimal risk of harm?

4. YES NO Will you obtain data through intervention or interaction with living or third party individuals?

"Intervention" includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (e.g. measurement of heart rate of venipuncture)
"Interaction" includes communication or interpersonal contact between the investigator and participant (e.g. surveying or interviewing)

5. YES NO Will you obtain identifiable private information about these individuals?

Private information includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place. Identifiable means that the identity of the participant maybe ascertained by the investigator.

Note: If you have questions as to whether your research requires IRB oversight, additional information is available at our website.
<http://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php>

Updated 07/08/2016

6. EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS: In accordance with federal regulations, the VSU IRB requires all responsible researchers, co-investigators, key personnel, including unaffiliated investigators, and faculty advising student researchers to complete the CITI educational program. Co-investigators from other institutions are not required to complete this if they have a certificate of completion from their own federally assured IRB.

Please visit: <http://www.citiprogram.org> to complete all of the following mandatory trainings:

1. Introduction
2. History and Ethical Principles
3. Defining Research with Human Subjects
4. The Regulations and the Social and Behavioral sciences
5. Basic Institutional Review Board (IRB) Regulations and Review Process
6. Assessing Risk in Social and Behavioral Sciences
7. Informed Consent
8. Privacy and Confidentiality
9. Valdosta State University Module

Additional modules may be required for specific types of research. Please check all that apply and complete the corresponding modules:

Study population targets	Additional CITI Modules Required
<input type="checkbox"/> a. Minors (under the age of 18)	Research with Children
<input type="checkbox"/> b. Public School Children	Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools
<input type="checkbox"/> c. Pregnant Women	Vulnerable Subjects
<input type="checkbox"/> d. Prisoners	Research with Prisoners
<input type="checkbox"/> e. Potentially vulnerable individuals (those whose consent maybe compromised due to socio-economic, educational or linguistic disadvantage.)	Research with Protected Populations
<input type="checkbox"/> f. Individuals in foreign countries	International Research
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> g. Individuals from different cultures or individuals from a particular racial/ethnic group	Group Harms: Research with Culturally or Medically Vulnerable groups
<input type="checkbox"/> h. Individuals about whom data will be collected from records (e.g., educational, health, or employment records)	Records-Based Research
<input type="checkbox"/> i. Individuals from or about whom Private Health Information (PHI) subject to HIPAA compliance will be collected	HIPAA and Human Subjects
<input type="checkbox"/> j. Individuals from whom information will be collected via Internet	Internet Research
<input type="checkbox"/> k. VSU Employees	Workers as Research Subjects

7. YES NO **Does the primary researcher, co-investigator, or any other key person, have a potential or actual significant financial conflict of interest in performance of the research?** If YES, it is required that the researcher completes the CITI module "Conflicts of Interest in Research Involving Human Subjects" and complete the VSU Conflict of Interest form available at: <http://www.valdosta.edu/grants/forms>

8. As a researcher you are expected to follow VSU's code of ethics. Will there be an additional code of ethics followed?
Include organization's name & Web address:

9. Name and location of external organization(s) providing research participants (attach letter(s) of cooperation)

10. YES NO UNCERTAIN **Does the study present more than minimal risk to the participants?**
"Minimal Risk" means that the risk of harm or discomfort anticipated in the proposed research are not greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Note that the concept of risk includes psychological, emotional, or behavioral risks to employability, economic well-being, social standing, and risk of civil criminal liability.

11. Federal Regulations permit the exemption of some types of research from IRB Committee review.

NOTE: Studies involving fetuses, pregnant women, children, or prisoners are not eligible for exemption.

Category 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Category 2: Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation. **Note: This category of exemption is not applicable to research involving minors (45 CFR 46.401 b).**

Updated 07/08/2016

Category 3: Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under **Category 2** if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

Category 4: Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Category 5: Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) Public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.

Category 6: Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Please answer each question below (12-15) in 1-3 paragraphs - answers to be submitted as a separate document.

12. In lay terms, what are the objectives of the proposed research?

13. Describe how the participants and/or data will be collected. Attach copies of posters, brochures, flyers, and/or signed letters of cooperation. Briefly describe the consent process utilized for this research.

14. Describe the research methodology. Attach all questionnaires, assessments, and/or focus group questions. If questionnaires or assessments will be developed during the research project please indicate the general nature of the questions in an attachment.

15. Describe how you will insure the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of the information about them, including how and by whom the data will be collected, managed, stored accessed, rendered anonymous, and destroyed.

CERTIFICATIONS AND REQUIRED SIGNATURES

Note: Applications without all required signatures will be not be reviewed.

Statement of Responsible Researcher:

I certify that I have completed required training regarding human participant research ethics and am familiar with the ethical guidelines and regulations regarding the protection of human participants from research risks. I will adhere to the policies and procedures of the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I will not initiate this research project until I receive written exemption or approval from the IRB. I will not involve any participant in the research until I have obtained and documented his/her informed consent as required by the IRB. I agree to (a) report to the IRB any unanticipated problems or adverse events which become apparent during the course or as a result of the research and the actions taken as a result, (b) cooperate with the IRB in the continuing review of this project, (c) obtain prior approval from the IRB before amending or altering the scope of the project or the research protocol, and (d) maintain documentation of consent and research data and reports for a minimum of three years and in accordance with approved data retention and procedures and confidentiality requirements after completion of the final report or longer if required by the sponsor or the institution. I understand that my department chair/unit director/faculty advisor (if I am a student) will receive a copy of my IRB exemption or approval report.

SIGNATURE: Meghan R. McBride **Date:** 09.30.16
Responsible Researcher

Statement of Faculty Advisor if Responsible Researcher is a Student:

I certify that I am familiar with the ethical guidelines and regulations regarding the protection of human participants from research risks and have completed training required by the VSU IRB. I agree to provide guidance and oversight as necessary to the above named student regarding the conduct of his/her research. I will ensure the student's timely requests for protocol modifications and/or continuing reviews, compliance with the ethical conduct of human participant research, and the submission of the final report. I understand that an IRB protocol cannot be closed until final report is submitted, and I agree that, if the student fails to complete a final report, I will be responsible for timely completion and submission of the report.

SIGNATURE: _____ **Date:** _____
Supervising Faculty

Updated 07/08/2016

12. In lay terms, what are the objectives of the proposed research?

The proposed study will illuminate the lived experiences of Black female nontraditional students at a public historically Black university in Southwest Georgia. I will accomplish this illumination by collecting stories from my participants primarily through interviews and presenting them in a narrative format that privileges the women's voices. In doing so, the proposed study will fill a gap in the literature on this population of students and provide critical insight into their matriculation experiences so that faculty and staff may design more responsive pedagogy and services and create a more inclusive campus climate.

13. Describe how the participants and/or data will be collected. Attach copies of posters, brochures, flyers, and/or signed letters of cooperation. Briefly describe the consent process utilized for this research.

In my position as the Assistant Registrar in the Registrar's Office at [D]SU, I have access to the information I will need to identify the potential pool of participants. However, I will not gather any information for research purposes until the IRB at both VSU and [D]SU have approved my study. I will use the institution's reporting system (Argos) that pulls information directly from the student information system (Banner) to identify all potential participants who meet the criteria for my study. To meet the criteria, participants must be classified as nontraditional (over the age of 24 or listed as an independent student), self-identified as Black or African American, and a female. After collecting a list of students who meet the minimum criteria for inclusion in the study, I will use my VSU student email to invite the students to participate in the study:

Dear [Student Name],

My name is Meghan McBride and I am Assistant Registrar in the Registrar's Office at [Dabny] State University. I am also a doctoral student at Valdosta State University preparing to undertake a research study as part of the requirements for my degree. My dissertation study, tentatively titled "The Lived Experiences of Black Female Nontraditional Students," will take place at [Dabny] State University.

I am contacting you because I believe you meet the criteria for inclusion in my study, and I would like to invite you to participate. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete three interview sessions with me over the course of several weeks. These interviews will be about your experiences as a nontraditional student attending an HBCU. I may also attend some of your classes to observe your interactions with your instructors and classmates.

Throughout all phases of the study, I will maintain strict confidentiality to protect your identity. You may also withdraw your participation at any time during the study without any repercussions at DSU or VSU. If you are interested in participating or would like additional information, please contact me by phone (229-XXX-XXXX) or by email (mrmcbride@valdosta.edu). I look forward to hearing from you.

Best Regards,

Meghan R. McBride

Should I not receive a sufficient number of responses within 5 days, I will create flyers containing the same information as contained in the email and post them around the school in hopes of eliciting more responses. In the event that I receive too many volunteers (over 15), I will send out a demographic questionnaire that allows potential participants to identify as having certain characteristics that are outlined in the literature as most suitable for inquiry. After creating my sample (preferable 12 individuals to increase the likelihood that 10 will complete the entire study), I will provide participants with a consent form that explains the study and allows them the opportunity to opt out at any time in the research process.

14. Describe the research methodology. Attach all questionnaires, assessments, and/or focus group questions. If questionnaires or assessments will be developed during the research project please indicate the general nature of the questions in an attachment.

This qualitative study will employ a narrative analysis methodology to guide data collection and analysis and presentation of results. Interviews will serve as the primary form of data collection. Although I have not yet developed the full interview protocol, I will cover general topics that allow me to answer the research questions. Generally, the protocol will cover experiences leading the students to enroll and persist in the HBCU, their experiences within the campus culture of the HBCU, and their perceptions of what nontraditional students need from faculty and staff in terms of support and pedagogy.

The preliminary list of questions are as follows:

Interview 1 Protocol – Life History

Tell me about yourself.

Describe your early schooling experiences.

- Support systems
- Good and bad experiences
- Parental involvement
- Extracurricular activities
- Type of school (demographics)

What is your family's education background?

- Parents' and siblings' education level
- First-generation college student

Explain your decision to go to college.

What led you to choose an HBCU?

Interview 2 Protocol – Matriculation Experiences

Tell me about your experiences when starting school.

- Application
- Enrollment
- Registration

What is your favorite aspect about attending an HBCU? Least?

Describe your typical school day.

Describe the campus culture. What is it like attending [Dabny] State? How do you see yourself fitting in on campus?

Have you ever considered withdrawing?

Interview 3 Protocol – Meaning-Making

How could faculty and staff at [Dabny] State make the initial process smoother for you as a nontraditional student?

- Application
- Enrollment
- Registration

How could faculty and staff at [Dabny] State make the schooling process smoother for you as a nontraditional student?

- Instruction
- Support
- Campus programs and services

What can the institution do for you as a nontraditional student to reduce stress related to school?

15. Describe how you will ensure the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of the information about them, including how and by whom the data will be collected, managed, stored, accessed, rendered anonymous, and destroyed.

I will ensure the privacy of my participants by conducting all interviews myself with only the participant present in a location where they feel comfortable. I will also maintain confidentiality by doing my own transcription of the interviews. As I transcribe, I will use the participants' pseudonyms, which I will store on my password-protected Macbook and secure flash drive along with all of my transcriptions and any other information I collect. I will be the only individual with access to the locations where data will be stored. I will maintain the data for one year or at the time of publication of my study, whichever is later. At that time, I will destroy the data by permanently deleting it from my Macbook and flash drive.

Appendix E

Valdosta State University IRB Exemption Report



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 03423-2016

INVESTIGATOR: Meghan McBride

PROJECT TITLE: *The Lived Experiences of Black Female Nontraditional HBCU Students*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. You may begin your study immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of your research all data must be kept securely (locked cabinet/password protected computer, etc.) for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *Consent statement must be read aloud to participants at the start of audio-taped interviews.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth W. Olphie *11/15/2016*

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.*

Revised: 06.02.16

Appendix F

[Dabny] State University IRB Exemption Report

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND SPONSORED PROGRAMS

DATE: November 8, 2016

TO: -Shelton Meghan McBride
FROM: State University IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [959269-1] The Lived Experiences of Black Female Nontraditional HBCU Students

REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: November 7, 2016

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #1

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The State University IRB has review your protocol and is approving this project as exempt under Category #1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as: regular and special education instructional strategies, or effectiveness or comparison of instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Cheri Williams at (229) 430-3690 or mackelle.williams@.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained withir State University IRB's records.

Appendix G

Email Invitation to Potential Participants

Dear [Student Name],

My name is Meghan McBride and I am the Assistant Registrar in the Registrar's Office at [Dabny] State University. I am also a doctoral student at Valdosta State University preparing to undertake a research study as part of the requirements for my degree. My dissertation study, tentatively titled "The Lived Experiences of Black Female Nontraditional Students," will take place at [Dabny] State University.

I am contacting you because I believe you meet the criteria for inclusion in my study, and I would like to invite you to participate. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete three interview sessions with me over the course of several weeks. These interviews will be about your experiences as a nontraditional student attending an HBCU. I may also attend some of your classes to observe your interactions with your instructors and classmates.

Throughout all phases of the study, I will maintain strict confidentiality to protect your identity. You may also withdraw your participation at any time during the study without any repercussions at DSU or VSU. If you are interested in participating or would like additional information, please contact me by phone (229-XXX-XXXX) or by email (mrmcbride@valdosta.edu). I look forward to hearing from you.

Best Regards,

Meghan R. McBride

Appendix H

Sample Data Analysis – Construction of the Life History Vignette

The excerpt below is an example of the connecting analysis I did on the data to construct the life history vignettes. As I read the transcripts, I highlighted passages that I considered important pieces of the life history narratives. Next, I cut and pasted the highlighted pieces into a Word document and arranged them into a chronology in a way that made sense.

Excerpt from Amber's first interview:

A – Yes. Yeah, A few years after they got married, they moved there and had me and my sister. So, then they moved back down here when I was uh, 2. 2 years old, so of course, that's where I grew up at, down here. I got an older sister. She's 3 years older than me. I'm 27, she's 30. I also have an older brother, but it was from my dad's previous marriage. Um, he didn't grow up in the house with us. He was way older, like 17 years older. But we came down here and me and my sister was homeschooled by my mother and father. They taught us all through, like from preschool on up to high school. We graduated through home school.

M – why did they do that?

A – well, it's a decision that was, they just decided to do it. It was, I guess they, it was put on his heart to do it.

M – did they work?

A – oh yeah! My mother, she the one did the teaching. My dad did a lot of the work. My mother taught us basically all the way up. He worked. My mother, she worked a little bit. When she did work, he taught us, so they alternated. She had a job, but she let it go to teach us. They both teach us, but she fully taught us every day, Monday through Friday. We had a set schedule. Our schedule was a little different, cause homeschool is

different, but we learned the same things. Our books was different. They were Christian based, so they was different. But we got up, probably about the same time that public schools started. We got up the same time and got out the same time. Only difference was we didn't catch the bus. Other than that, we had the same schedule, we had recess, same thing. We had friends. Of course, they would get out later 'cause they had to ride the bus. And so, we met with them, we all played, no problem.

Appendix I
Participant Comparison Chart

Table 1

Participant Comparison Chart

Participant	Characteristics				
	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Number of Children</i>	<i>Childhood Socioeconomic Status</i>	<i>Educational Background Prior to Reentry at HBCU</i>
Amber	27	Never married	0	Working poor or poverty	Homeschooled, graduated from the local technical college
Debbie	56	Married	4	Working poor	Graduated high school, the local technical college, and the junior college
Kayla	35	Never married	0	Working poor	Graduated high school, stopped out of a nearby university, then graduated from a nearby junior college
Shaquita	29	Never married	0	Lower middle class	Homeschooled, stopped out of a predominantly-White Christian college, then transferred from the nearby junior college
Shontae	37	Divorced	3	Working poor	Graduated high school, stopped out of the local junior college
Zoe	30	Never married	0	Poverty	Graduated high school late, graduated from a nearby technical college, stopped out of the local junior college, reentered and graduated from the local junior college

Appendix J
Coding Matrix

Code Matrix Browser

Code System

Amber 1 Amber 2 Amber 3 Debbie 1 Debbie 2 Debbie 3 Kayla 1 Kayla 2 and 3 Shaquita 1 Shaquita 2 Shaquita 3 Shontae 1 Shontae 2 Shontae 3 Zoe 1 Zoe 2 Zoe 3

RED

- Hardships
- Marginalization
- Barriers to Reentry
- Events/Experiences Precipitating Reentry
 - Life's Critical Moments
 - Coping with Challenges
 - Outside Encouragement
- Values Influencing Reentry
 - Having a Career
 - Being a Role Model
 - Having an Education
- The Decision to Attend Albany State
 - Convenience of Albany State
 - Family Connection to Albany State
- Selecting a Major
- Roadblocks Along the Way
 - Institutional Barriers
 - Interrole Conflict
- Prior College Experiences
 - Negative Prior College Experiences
 - Positive Prior College Experiences
- The Women as Students
 - Academic Behaviors
 - Preplanning, Preparation
 - Resourcefulness
- The Institution
 - Instructors/Teaching/Assignments
 - Albany State Curriculum
 - Institutional Responsiveness - Academic
 - Institutional Responsiveness - Social Ne
 - Perspectives on/Experiences with Non-
 - Perspectives on Younger Students
 - Overall Perspective/Experience - HBCU
- Campus Culture
 - Helping Each Other
 - Mentoring/Maternal Role at School
 - Fitting In or Not on Campus
- Persistence
 - Institutional Factors Supporting Persist
 - Non-Institutional Factors Supporting Pe

Appendix K
Code System

Code System		
Code System		670
RED		1
Hardships	■	39
Marginalization	■	14
Barriers to Reentry	■	16
Events/Experiences Precipitating Reentry		0
Life's Critical Moments	■	10
Coping with Challenges	■	4
Outside Encouragement	■	8
Values Influencing Reentry		0
Having a Career		4
Being a Role Model		4
Having an Education	■	5
The Decision to Attend Albany State		0
Convenience of Albany State	■	2
Family Connection to Albany State	■	10
Selecting a Major	■	7
Roadblocks Along the Way	■	17
Institutional Barriers	■	51
Interrole Conflict	■	47
Prior College Experiences		2
Negative Prior College Experiences		8
Positive Prior College Experiences		11
The Women as Students		86
The Institution		242
Campus Culture		2
Helping Each Other	■	9
Mentoring/Maternal Role at School		11
Fitting In or Not on Campus		32
Persistence		0
Institutional Factors Supporting Persistence		4
Non-Institutional Factors Supporting Persistence	■	18