

Georgia Southern University

Digital Commons@Georgia Southern

---

Leadership, Technology, and Human  
Development Faculty Publications

Leadership, Technology and Human  
Development, Department of

---

3-20-2020

## The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution

Talisha L. Adams

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, tlawso11@utk.edu

Juliann Sergi McBrayer

Georgia Southern University, jmcbrayer@georgiasouthern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/leadership-facpubs>



Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Adams, Talisha L., Juliann Sergi McBrayer. 2020. "The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution." *The Qualitative Report*, 25 (3): 733-757: Nova Southeastern University. doi: <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4224> source: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss3/12/> <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/leadership-facpubs/185>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Leadership, Technology and Human Development, Department of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leadership, Technology, and Human Development Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

---

3-20-2020

## The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution

Talisha Lawson Adams  
*University of Tennessee, Knoxville, tlawso11@utk.edu*

Juliann Sergi McBrayer  
*Georgia Southern University, jmcbayer@georgiasouthern.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Adams, T. L., & McBrayer, J. S. (2020). The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 733-757. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4224>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



## The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution

### Abstract

As many colleges and universities continue to increase their enrollment and diversification of their student body, the number of first-generation college students of color will continue to rise. Colleges have been charged with the challenge of not only enrolling this student population but also ensuring that they are connected to the university and persist to graduation. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of first-generation college students of color at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This study utilized individual in-depth interviews and a focus group to examine how first-generation students of color experienced college at a PWI. Four major themes were revealed: a college degree is a means to a better lifestyle; money always matters; a heightened sense of safety concerns exists; and there is a desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment. The findings of this study may aid institutional leaders in understanding the first-generation college student of color experience at a PWI and assist in establishing and maintaining academic and social support programs that are geared towards these students.

### Keywords

First-Generation, College Students, Culture, Integration, Students of Color, Predominantly White Institution (PWI), Phenomenological Qualitative Research Design

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

# The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution

Talisha Lawson Adams  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

Juliann Sergi McBrayer  
Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, USA

---

*As many colleges and universities continue to increase their enrollment and diversification of their student body, the number of first-generation college students of color will continue to rise. Colleges have been charged with the challenge of not only enrolling this student population but also ensuring that they are connected to the university and persist to graduation. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of first-generation college students of color at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This study utilized individual in-depth interviews and a focus group to examine how first-generation students of color experienced college at a PWI. Four major themes were revealed: a college degree is a means to a better lifestyle; money always matters; a heightened sense of safety concerns exists; and there is a desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment. The findings of this study may aid institutional leaders in understanding the first-generation college student of color experience at a PWI and assist in establishing and maintaining academic and social support programs that are geared towards these students. Keywords: First-Generation, College Students, Culture, Integration, Students of Color, Predominantly White Institution (PWI), Phenomenological Qualitative Research Design*

---

## Introduction

The United States is experiencing the diversification or Browning of America, which describes the nation's rapid growth in the number of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and multiracial people (Frey, 2015; Sundstrom, 2008; Wong, 2016). According to projections, by the year 2044, minorities will be the majority in America, and by 2060, 56% of the population will be comprised of races other than non-Hispanic, single-race Whites (Colby & Ortman, 2014). Institutions of higher education, being a microcosm of society are impacted by these shifts in demographics (Keenan, 2015). In more recent years, universities have been successful in recruiting and enrolling racial and ethnic minorities, but the retention and graduation rates of students of color continue to be lower than the overall student population (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011). This may be attributed to universities' neglect in acknowledging the racial climate on campuses that has resulted in challenges for students of color (Keenan, 2015). As campuses continue to diversify their student population, the need to address issues of diversity and inclusion becomes more relevant.

Furthermore, the enrollment trends in today's institutions reveal higher enrollment rates for students from traditionally underrepresented groups, such as students from low-income

backgrounds, non-traditional adult learners, and first-generation college students. While first-generation college students may come from various socioeconomic backgrounds, they overwhelmingly are from low-income families (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995). As colleges and universities continue to diversify, there continues to be an increased presence of students who are the first in their families to pursue higher education (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

In recent years, there has been extensive research conducted on first-generation college students and the barriers and obstacles that they encounter. However, much of the research compares first-generation college students to continuing-generation college students regarding their pre-college experiences, their transition from high school to college, and their academic achievement, and social integration at colleges and universities (Kuh & Love, 2000; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Stuber, 2011; Swanbrow-Becker, Schelbe, Romano, & Spinelli, 2017; Terenzini et al., 1995; VanTassel-Baska, Stambaugh, & Hébert, 2018; Wibrowski, Matthews, & Kitsantas, 2017). Additionally, the literature reveals a mismatch between the home culture of first-generation college students and the campus in which they attend (Coffman, 2011; Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Tibbetts et al., 2016). This cultural mismatch forces first-generation college students to straddle between two cultures, which presents additional challenges. These students report feelings of straddling between the home culture in which they grew up and are familiar and the culture of their college campus (Whitehead & Wright, 2017). Often, these two cultures do not align causing some first-generation college students to experience a cultural mismatch between the norms of colleges and universities and the norms of their home culture (Tibbetts et al., 2016). However, limited research focuses on the role integration into the institutional culture plays in the college experience and persistence of first-generation college students, specifically students of color on predominantly White college campuses. Additionally, limited research discusses the intersectionality of being both a student of color and being a first-generation college student regarding the student experience integrating into the culture of predominantly White campuses and thus, a gap in the literature has been identified.

### **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this review of the literature was to gain an understanding of first-generation college students of color as they integrate into the institutional culture of a PWI. This brief synopsis of the literature defines first-generation college student and identifies a standard set of needs and challenges faced by this student population.

A first-generation college student is one whose parents or legal guardians have not obtained a bachelor's degree even if they have attended or received some college credit (Choy, 2001). Those students who come from families where at least one parent or guardian have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher are referred to as continuing-generation college students. Despite recent strides in recruitment efforts of underrepresented student populations, first-generation college students continue to enroll in colleges and universities at a lower rate than their continuing-generation counterparts (Caltaldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). First-generation college students make up approximately one-third of the freshman population at colleges and universities (Stuber, 2011). Furthermore, it is more likely for first-generation students to leave college without obtaining a college degree than their continuing-generation peers (Caltaldi et al., 2018; Lightweis, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Only 73% of first-generation college students return their second year (Lightweis, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 33% of first-generation college students from parents that have no college experience drop out prior to completing a degree compared to 14% of

continuing-generation college students (Caltaldi et al., 2018). Additionally, the dropout percentage decreases to 26% for first-generation college students of parents who have some college experience.

First-generation college students share a common set of needs and challenges, such as they are more likely to come from low-income families, identify as a racial minority, are less prepared academically for college, report more feelings of marginalization, and experience greater cultural difficulties (Darling & Smith, 2007; Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017). First-generation college students have lower grade point averages and lower measures of academic engagement, are less likely to return to year two of college, and experience lower retention rates than non-first-generation students (Caltaldi et al., 2018; Darling & Smith, 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Failure to address racial climate at the institutional level may result in challenges for students of color (Keenan, 2015). These challenges become even more visible when looking at first-generation college students of color attending PWIs, as racial identity plays an essential role in the experiences of students of color that attend PWIs. Students of color attending PWIs overwhelmingly report unwelcoming environments, feelings of alienation, and a multitude of barriers to degree completion (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Gray, Johnson, Kish-Gephart, & Tilton, 2017; Havlik, Malott, Pulliam, & Steen, 2017; Keenan, 2015; Pratt et al., 2017). Enrolling and retaining students of color to degree completion have been two of the pressing issues facing colleges and universities for several decades (Bial, 2016; Keenan, 2015; Slaughter, 1988; Wong, 2016). The literature presents numerous accounts of why students of color struggle on predominantly White campuses (Chen et al., 2014; Jones & Reddick, 2017; Turner, 1994; Wong, 2016).

For example, Turner (1994) conducted a qualitative study that examined how faculty, staff, and students of color at a major research university perceived campus climate. This study found campus climate to be unwelcoming, unconcerned, and lonely. Additionally, students felt that the institution had expectations that students of color would not be successful. The researcher described how students of color felt on predominantly White campuses as “guests in someone else’s house” who must abide rules without question, only visit certain rooms, and be on their best behavior (p. 356).

Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) examined the persistence of Black students attending a PWI using focus groups and individual interviews. Results of their study revealed that Black students were the victim of racial stereotyping that led to alienation and sometimes hostile environments. Furthermore, participants discussed the need to validate their competence and intelligence to both White faculty and peers. Students cited frequent encounters of judgments made about their appearance. Although the students in this study were all regarded as successful students, they each went through a phase of learning to cope with the stressors of stereotypes in their academic and social environments.

Relatedly, Peteet, Montgomery, and Weekes (2015) study examined high achieving African American and Hispanic students at a PWI and their attitudes toward their sense of belonging at their institution. Their research found that these high achieving students experienced a sense of intellectual phoniness known as imposter phenomenon. Furthermore, the results revealed that students’ first-generation status, psychological well-being, and low ethnic identity were significant predictors of imposter phenomenon. Peteet et al. (2015) finding regarding imposter phenomenon in students of color are consistent with Whitehead and Wright’s (2017) findings on first-generation college students in that students report feelings of straddling between their home culture and culture of their college campus.

The intersectionality of being both a student of color and being a first-generation college student regarding the student experience integrating into the culture of predominantly White campuses is understudied. Thus, as campuses continue to diversify their student population, the need to address issues of diversity and inclusion become more relevant. In

recent years, several academic and social support programs have been implemented to assist first-generation students in overcoming some of these challenges and aiding in persisting to graduation, but a gap remains in the literature warranting further research.

### **Role of the Researchers**

In conducting qualitative research, “data is mediated through a human instrument, the researcher, rather than some inanimate inventory, questionnaire, or machine” (Merriam, 1988, p. 19). Merriam (2002) stated that “the human instrument seems ideal for collecting and analyzing data due to its ability to be immediately adaptive and responsive” (p. 5). Thus, the primary researcher’s personal experience from working and studying about higher education and student affairs sparked the researcher’s interest in learning more about the experiences of underrepresented student populations. The researcher has eleven years of experience working in higher education as a graduate student and professional staff member. She has worked in both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. Additionally, this topic is one that is very personal and important to the researcher, as the researcher identifies as a female and a first-generation college student who has successfully navigated the undergraduate experience. The researcher comes from a low-income background and identifies as a student of color who attended and graduated from a PWI.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the researcher works at the institution where the research was conducted, as a mid-level Academic Affairs professional. Being that human beings innately have biases, the researcher has acknowledged and accepted the responsibility to be cognizant of biases and monitored them throughout the data collection and analysis process. Prior to data collection, the researcher utilized data analysis strategies and kept a journal to document any biases and monitored them throughout the research process. Additionally, the researcher has recognized that her own experiences as a first-generation college student of color are not necessarily the experiences of all first-generation college students of color.

For the purpose of this research, the researcher has taken on the role of an outsider. Though the researcher works at the institution in which the participants attend, and she has similar background characteristics of the student population, she is merely an outsider trying to understand more about their lived experiences as first-generation college students of color. The researcher is not in a position of power over these students. The students may consider the researcher an insider to the extent that they have the commonality of being first-generation, a person of color, and connected to the same institution. Therefore, the participants may have been more prone to openly share their experiences with the researcher as opposed to talking to a stranger who has no connection to the university. The secondary researcher is a scholarly-practitioner in educational leadership dedicated to the advancement of research productivity in the area of academic preparation programs.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of first-generation college students of color as they integrate into the institutional culture of a PWI. The setting of the research study was one large, public, predominantly White, four-year research university located in the southeastern region of the United States. This study was guided by the following overarching research question: How do first-generation college students of color experience college at a PWI? The researchers selected phenomenology as the

qualitative design to capture the essence of the lived experiences of the participants to allow their voices to be heard and their individual stories to be shared (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). An in-depth analysis of the participants' stories provided the researchers greater understanding into the essences of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). One characteristic of a qualitative research design is that "researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and experiences; that is, how do people make sense of their experience" (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). This type of research allowed the researchers the opportunity to be in the natural setting of the institution in which the students were enrolled and to hear first-hand from the students their recollection of their experiences as a first-generation college student of color at a PWI. Qualitative research methods allowed the researchers to gather more personal and detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2002).

Additionally, phenomenology was utilized as the purpose of phenomenology in general is to determine what the experience means for the people who have had the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, transcendental phenomenology was utilized as it is a research design for acquiring and collecting data to frame the human experience (Moustakas, 1994). By adopting a phenomenological qualitative approach that was transcendental, the researchers are able to capture the wholeness and essence of the students' experience from the participants in an all-encompassing manner. Participants in this study were provided the opportunity to share their experiences through a demographic questionnaire, individual, in-depth interviews, and a focus group.

## Participants

This study collected information from currently enrolled first-generation college students of color. The school population consisted of 78% White, 7% African-American, 4% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 3% Multiracial, and 3% Other. The researchers recruited students using purposeful sampling with campus advertising through programs and departments on campus whose mission includes serving students of color. First-generation college students of color who volunteered to be participants in the study were selected pending the confirmation that they met the specific criteria identified for this study. Criteria included identifying as a student of color (African American, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian American descent), identifying as a first-generation college student, being a native student of the university, being 18 years of age or older, being currently enrolled at the research site, and having experienced the phenomenon of integrating into the institutional culture of a PWI for at least one semester. It is recommended that qualitative, phenomenology designs range from three to ten participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the researchers selected eight eligible participants using the purposeful sampling method to be included in the study.

Once participants were confirmed, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent acknowledging their willingness to participate in the study and providing permission for the researchers to audio-record their conversations. To protect the anonymity, identity, and confidentiality of research participants, names were replaced with pseudonyms that participants self-provided or were assigned by the researchers if the participant did not desire to provide a pseudonym. Every attempt was made to follow all ethical obligations. Students who expressed interest in participating in the research study were asked to complete a pre-screening form administered online via *Qualtrics*. To capture a variety of perspectives in the study, the researchers selected and interviewed eight participants who were from a range of backgrounds including race, age, gender, and classification. All participants from the individual interviews were then invited to participate in the subsequent focus group discussion to delve

deeper and better understand their experiences. Six of the eight participants opted to participate in the focus group discussion.

### **Instrumentation**

To capture demographic information (ethnicity, age, major, and classification), a brief questionnaire was administered by paper at the start of the individual interviews for all participants to complete. For the first phase of the study, individual, in-depth interviews were conducted using an interview protocol and the interviews were audio-recorded. The researchers utilized questions from surveys in the current research literature on students of color, first-generation college students, and student persistence to construct the interview questions as aligned to the research question. Select questions included in the interview protocol and focus group discussion guide have been adapted and modified from two previously published instruments to create an interview protocol and focus group guide. First, questions were adapted from the Watson, Cuyjet, Wright, and Terrell (2002) study on how minority students experience college. Secondly, the researchers modified questions from the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) developed in 2009 by Davidson, Beck, and Milligan. The questions for the interview protocol and focus group guide have been aligned with the literature and research questions. Participants were verbally asked their preferred pronouns in order to accurately portray their gender identity. The responses to the individual interviews were kept confidential and were used to inform subsequent focus group discussion questions. The individual interviews were conducted for approximately 60 minutes and took place face-to-face in a private office space on the participants' campus in a location convenient to the participant.

For the second phase, responses from the individual interviews were analyzed to finalize the focus group discussion questions and the guide was finalized. The focus group discussion guide allowed the researchers an opportunity to generate new information on the research topic and enabled participants to elaborate on statements they shared beforehand and clarify previous responses and the discussion was audio-recorded. During this discussion, research participants were afforded the opportunity to hear the stories of other participants, which triggered memories of additional experiences they wished to share, which led to a collection of more meaningful information. The focus group discussion was conducted for approximately 90 minutes and took place face-to-face in a private office space on the participants' campus in a location convenient to the participant.

### **Data Analysis**

Immediately following both the interviews and focus group, the researchers transcribed the responses verbatim and sent transcripts to participants via email to check for accuracy. Data analysis and coding included five phenomenological data analysis strategies to include epoché, horizontalization, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological studies are expected to rid themselves of prejudgments and stay away from their own biases. Thus, the researchers turned to the first strategy of epoché as a “process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Although qualitative researchers cannot completely rid themselves of biases, it is important for them to recognize them. Prior to the start of the study, the researchers identified data analysis strategies, kept a journal in order to document any of biases, and engaged in practices to ensure trustworthiness. While analyzing data in the current study, the researchers placed their personal views to the side and listened to

each recording and read each transcription with an open-mind containing as little bias as possible.

The second strategy of reduction was utilized by the researchers and focused solely on the research topic and the essence of the experience. This process required the researchers to “isolate the phenomena in order to comprehend its essence” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 27). The researchers were able to isolate the phenomenon by listening to the interview transcripts in full and reading through the written transcripts several times for understanding and important notes were compiled regarding the transcripts directly on the printed transcripts.

The third strategy employed horizontalization to give equal value to all of the participants’ statements. The researchers listed all significant statements that were relevant to the participants’ experiences providing each statement with equal value. The researchers reviewed the transcripts and tracked the significant statements using the track changes feature in Microsoft Word. The researchers deleted statements that were deemed repetitive, overlapping, or not related to the research topic or question. This elimination process left the researchers with only statements, known as horizons that were related to the phenomenon being investigated. In this phase, the researchers organized the horizons that were developed and the horizons were clustered into themes and subthemes as well as textural descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. The researchers paid careful attention to each word and line of the data and developed the codes directly from the transcripts. Categories were developed from the codes and themes and subthemes were identified.

The fourth strategy included imaginative variation, which “takes the varying perspectives of the participants and unify them into structural themes so that they represent the essences or underlying structures of the experiences” (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 259). Imaginative variation seeks potential meanings through various vantage points, perspectives, roles, positions, and functions (Moustakas, 1994). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) described this step as imagining “if one were walking around a modern sculpture, seeing different things from different angles” (p. 27). In this study, imaginative variation allowed the researchers to unify the rich descriptions that were captured from the individual participants into structural themes that represented the essences of the experiences.

The final strategy focused on the synthesis of meanings and essences. According to Moustakas, “the essences of any experience are never fully exhausted.” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). Instead, the synthesis includes the essences formed at a particular time and place by an individual researcher studying the phenomenon. This final description represents “the structure of the experience being studied and presents the essence of the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, pp. 27-28). This final step includes a combined description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon and what they experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this final step, the researchers created a composite textural and structural description that captured the essence of the experience for all participants as a whole. The researchers looked for similar phrases, concepts, perceptions, descriptions, and experiences amongst the participants as well as differences in their stories. Participants were provided with an opportunity to provide comments or feedback on the emergent themes and subthemes. Finally, using textural descriptions, a synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon were finalized.

## **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) said: “The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?” (p. 290). In regard to trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that readers are specifically concerned with

“internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (p. 290). It is recommended that qualitative researchers engage in a minimum of two verification procedures in any given study in order to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Poth; 2018) and this study employed four verification processes.

The first method that was employed in this study is member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checking as “the most critical technique used for establishing credibility” (p. 314). This approach involved taking data interpretations and analyses back to the participants for verification and accuracy. Member checking was implemented throughout the data analysis process. Participants were able to review their individual transcripts for accuracy and they were provided with an opportunity to provide feedback on the findings of the study.

A second method that was used to establish trustworthiness was triangulation. Merriam (1998) defined triangulation as “using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings” (p. 204). Triangulation was performed in this study to enhance validity. Triangulation was achieved by not solely relying on interviews, but also incorporating a focus group discussion to help validate the themes. By using multiple methods for data collection and analysis, triangulation was able to strengthen both the reliability and internal validity of the research.

A third method identified was to provide rich, thick descriptions to enhance results. The method was described as “providing enough descriptions so that readers can be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether finding can be transferred” (Merriam, 1988, p. 211). Direct quotes were used to support the findings and detailed descriptions of each stage in the data collecting and analyzing process were recorded and reported.

The final method supported the establishment of trustworthiness by utilizing an audit trail. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that an “inquiry audit cannot be conducted without a residue of records stemming from the inquiry” (p. 319). Merriam (1988) stated that “findings can be authenticated by following the trail of a researcher who describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (p. 207). An audit trail was maintained throughout this study by including specific citations and direct quotes that were obtained from the interviews and focus group discussion as well as by keeping accurate records of the additional documents that were reviewed during data collection.

## **Ethical Considerations**

One of the responsibilities of researchers is to “confront the ethics and politics of the research” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). Furthermore, since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, “data have been filtered through his or her particular theoretical position and biases” (Merriam, 1988, p. 182). Merriam (1988) stated that “the investigator is left to rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout most of the research effort” (p. 34). Therefore, it is important to be aware of all potential ethical issues and attempt to avoid them.

To avoid ethical dilemmas, permission to conduct the research was obtained from both the research and the teaching institutions’ Institutional Review Board (IRB) and a letter of cooperation was obtained from the research university administration. After permission was received from the IRB, an approved recruitment flyer and email were circulated around campus to recruit first-generation students of color volunteers to participate in the research study. Once participants were confirmed, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form acknowledging their willingness to participate in the study, options for opting out if needed,

assurance of confidentiality, and permission for the researchers to audio-record their conversations. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants, pseudonyms were selected by the participants. Physical study materials, including interview and focus group questions, handwritten notes, written demographic profiles, and recorded conversations were collected and securely stored in a password protected file for confidentiality.

## Results

Coding and analysis of the data from the individual, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion revealed four major themes about first-generation college students of color experiences at one PWI. Four major themes were revealed: a college degree is a means to a better lifestyle; money always matters; a heightened sense of safety concerns exists; and there is a desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment. Narrative outcomes and direct quotes from the research participants are used throughout the findings in order to better describe the essence of their experiences using their own voices and words. Table 1 depicts an overview of the emergent themes.

Table 1. *Emergent Themes*

Thematic Category	Thematic Description	Definition
Theme One	College degree is a means to a better lifestyle	Addresses participants' perceptions that a college degree affords them the opportunity to surpass their past circumstances and break generational cycles in their families
Theme Two	Money always matters	Discusses participants' perceptions of the role that finances play in their institutional choice and their college experience
Theme Three	Heightened sense of safety concerns exists	Discusses participants' perceptions and experiences of feeling safe and unsafe on their college campus
Theme Four	Desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment	Addresses participants' perceptions of the need for a more supportive and diverse campus environment

The first theme of college degree is a means to a better lifestyle was reoccurring throughout the interview process. This theme addresses participants' perceptions that a college degree affords them the opportunity to surpass their past circumstances and break generational cycles in their families. Two subthemes were identified and include: do not forget where you came from and family is essential. The do not forget where you came from subtheme portrays participants' acknowledgment that their backgrounds and upbringings are essential components of their identity, college experience, and motivation to be successful. The family is essential subtheme describes the role that families play in being a source of support, encouragement, motivation, and stress in the participants' college experiences.

The second theme money always matters reflects participants' perceptions of the role that finances play in their institutional choice and their college experience. Theme two consists of two subthemes: financial aid package sways college choice and working is not optional.

Financial aid package sways college choice subtheme addresses participants' decision to consider the financial aid packages offered by prospective institutions as a key factor in deciding which institution to ultimately attend. The working is not optional subtheme outlines the participants' need to have constant employment while being a full-time student.

The third theme is heightened sense of safety concerns exists. This theme highlights participants' perceptions and experiences of feeling safe and unsafe on their college campus. The two subthemes include impact of political polarization on college experience and biased incidents against marginalized groups. The impact of political polarization on college experience subtheme emphasizes the political divide that participants experienced on campus in the aftermath of the recent presidential election. In the biased incidents against marginalized groups subtheme, participants recall several instances where biases occurred due to race, religion, and/or sexual orientation.

The final theme, desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment, addresses participants' perceptions of the need for a more supportive and diverse campus environment. The three subthemes include classroom learning environment, campus culture, and institutional support. The classroom learning environment subtheme conveys participants' perceptions of their experiences in the classroom with peers and faculty members. The campus culture subtheme provides an in-depth description of the participants' perceptions of the campus environment and culture. The institutional support subtheme focuses on participants' perceptions and level of satisfaction with campus administrators' support of a multicultural campus environment.

### **Theme One: College Degree Is a Means to a Better Lifestyle**

Participants discussed the importance of obtaining a college degree and what earning a college degree means to them. Participants discussed attending college as a point of pride. In addition, participants shared that they valued having access to higher education. Theme one addressed participants' perceptions that a college degree affords them the opportunity to surpass the circumstances from which they grew up and the potential to break generational cycles of poverty and lack of higher education in their families. Several participants discussed overcoming challenging backgrounds prior to enrolling in college. They view education as an opportunity to have a better quality of life and to have access to things that they did not have growing up. Earning a college degree was described as an achievement that could have important implications in the participants' families for future generations. The participants described the need to be successful not only for their own sake but also for the future of their families. All participants discussed plans to complete their college degree at their current institution and several participants discussed a desire to attend graduate or professional school. Eric had the following to say about his background and how being enrolled at the institution provides a means to a quality of life.

My home life was pretty rough. I grew up impoverished. Lots of days there would be times where we didn't have anything to eat or we'd have to eat at school because that's the only meal you're getting today. So, there was a lot of poverty. My mom and my sister were always at each other's neck...I would go through periods of being an only child to having a sister again because my mom would kick her out. So, it was just a lot of chaos and trauma all the time. We've had our shares of ups and downs. I've been homeless. I've just been through the ringer...For me, I would say just from where I came from and like all that, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages because I just tend to ignore the disadvantages. I can't really. That's probably just an oversight on my end. My

life has been filled with so much negativity. It's like I am just trying to make it through.

Chris shared his thoughts on the value of a college degree from the perspective of an African American, first-generation male coming from a low-income background.

I most definitely plan to finish. I don't care what anyone says, a college degree to an African American male that didn't come from much, I take that back that's disrespectful.

Participants described the value of a college degree as a gateway to new opportunities and a better lifestyle, both socially and economically. Theme one consists of two subthemes: do not forget where you came from and family is essential.

**Do not forget where you came from.** Participants described their background and upbringings as essential components of their identity and their college experience. Participants acknowledged their backgrounds and where they came from and not allowing past circumstances to hinder them from where they would like to go in life. Some of the participants discussed coming from challenging backgrounds. Participants shared that the challenges that they encountered made them stronger and made them appreciate the opportunity to obtain a college degree even more. Participants discussed not taking this opportunity to better themselves for granted. Chris shared his thoughts on the value of a college degree from the perspective of an African American, first-generation male coming from a low-income background.

From an African American male that didn't have a lot of resources growing up, a college degree will always be the best thing for me. I don't care what anyone says. So that is always going to push me to get my education regardless of what I have to go through.

Participants also openly discussed the impact that their background had on their ability to relate to their peers at the institution. Two participants disclosed that due to being from a lower-social class background, they oftentimes felt like classism hindered them from relating to their peers. For example, Miguel stated, "I can't really relate to everyone else here. I guess because they are from an upper-middle class or upper class." Natalie also discussed social class differences in detail. She mentioned not having a car and having to take public transportation everywhere she needs to go. Natalie described her experience dealing with social class differences and shared that "Most of the kids here are rich or come from middle-class families. All they see is this campus, this nice beautiful campus. But if you go away from [campus] you see all that poverty."

Participants acknowledged their backgrounds and the challenges that they encountered as being an important part of their story and identity. They were able to utilize their challenges and upbringings as a source of motivation and not a hindrance to their success.

**Family is essential.** Stories from the participants revealed that being a first-generation college student of color is not only important to the student pursuing the degree, but it also had important implications for their families. This subtheme addresses the role that families play in being a source of support, encouragement, motivation, and stress in participants' college experiences. Participants described a college degree as a pathway to a better quality of life for themselves and for those they love the most. Participants discussed that by earning a college

degree they would have the opportunity to break generational cycles and set a new standard for future generations to follow. When asked about the factors that motivated them to attend and remain in college, participants disclosed a desire to make their families proud and, in some instances, to be able to take care of their family in the future. For example, Crystal shared the importance of being successful in order to set a positive example for her younger family members and to “make her momma proud.” Crystal is the oldest of her siblings and has taken on the responsibility of setting the tone for the younger generation to follow. When asked what does being first in your family to attend college means to you, Miguel had the following response:

I guess it means a lot because it is not like a bad pressure. It’s kind of like I need college to succeed. I have to succeed in college in order to do something. My dad didn’t go to school. His education ended in elementary school. He had to drop out and help his family.

Eric described what being first in his family means to him.

Well, it’s a lot of mixed emotions. Mainly for me, it brings upon a sense of duty. Because I am the first to attend college, I need to be the one to start this trend for future generations in my family.

However, not all participants discussed having the support from their family. Natalie discussed not feeling supported by her family and she stated, “I feel like my parents’ attention is so occupied on the other kids that they forgot about me going to college.” Eric described what appeared to be family achievement guilt for having the opportunity to attend college while others before him did not have the same opportunity and noted, “I feel pride that I was the first. A big one is melancholy that my parents and siblings didn’t get to go. I sort of feel like why me instead of them.” Stories from the participants revealed that families are an essential component of their college experience. Families may be a source of support, encouragement, motivation, or stress.

## **Theme Two: Money Always Matters**

Financing a college education can be very important to first-generation college students of color. Theme two, money always matters, discusses participants’ perceptions of the role that finances play in their institutional choice and their college experience. This theme emerged as several participants discussed coming from low-income backgrounds, which made attending a college that is affordable a major priority. Theme two consists of the following subthemes: financial aid package sways college choice and working is not optional.

**Financial aid package sways college choice.** Throughout the course of the interviews, several participants discussed that this institution was not their first college choice of institution. However, their financial aid package swayed their decision to attend the institution. Six of the participants discussed committing to the institution due to the financial aid package that they were awarded. Ellen shared that this institution was her last choice but the financial package swayed her decision to attend. When Chris was asked about why he decided to attend this institution, his response was, “The money. The scholarship packet I was offered.” Eric acknowledged that he came from an impoverished background and it was very important for him to attend an institution that was affordable in order to prevent adding the additional stressor of financing college to his family. Like Chris, he selected to attend this institution due to

receiving a generous scholarship and financial aid packet. Robert, another participant, stated that he selected the institution based off of the scholarship packet he received. He shared that he selected the institution due to receiving a “full ride.” Robert also shared that college affordability was one of his biggest fears about attending college. Participants revealed that college affordability played an instrumental role in deciding their college choice. Financial aid packages oftentimes influenced the decision as to which college participants would attend.

**Working is not optional.** In addition to being a full-time student, participants expressed the need to work in order to supplement their income. Many of participants disclosed coming from low-income backgrounds. Therefore, most participants were not able to seek out their families for financial assistance. Instead, participants shared the need to have constant employment. Several participants worked on-campus jobs, while others worked in the local community. Ellen has worked in several different positions since she has been enrolled as a student. She has worked both on and off-campus. Ellen described her need to work with the following:

I am currently doing everything on my own. My parents can't afford to like help me out or anything because they have so many kids. So, I feel like it's probably affected my studying habits because I am also working longer hours than other students are.

Chris disclosed receiving a generous financial aid package from the university, but there comes a point in every semester where that aid depletes, and he has to have a job. Natalie has been working the entire time she has been in college and like Ellen, she has held several different positions on campus. Natalie has to work to support herself but she also supports her family. Eric's story is very similar to Natalie's as he has been employed since he was a sophomore in college. Eric also shared that he sends money home to support his family. He sometimes picks up extra shifts on his job in order to ensure he has the money to send home. Eric shared that working has impacted his studies.

There were two participants who discussed their family being able to support them financially. Miguel and Robert both mentioned that their families encouraged them to focus on their academics and not working. Miguel's father supports him financially and Robert's family insists that he only keeps his work-study position in order to remain focused on graduating. However, the majority of the participants disclosed the need to work in order to supplement their income. For those participants, working was not optional. Some participants used their funds to solely support themselves while others also had to support their families back home.

### **Theme Three: Heightened Sense of Safety Concerns Exists**

Participants described a heightened sense of safety concerns on their college campus. This theme encapsulated participants' perceptions and experiences of feeling safe and unsafe on their college campus. On a normal day on campus, participants expressed feeling safe. However, over the past few years, there has been an increase in certain events and activities that are taking place on campus that has placed their sense of safety at risk (a shooting that was supposed to occur on campus a week before the interview, rally day after the presidential election, White supremacist showing up on campus, altercations on campus, calling out of racial slurs).

Crystal portrayed the impact that these events have had on her student experience and her desire to persist at the university. She shared feelings of feeling unsafe and the thought of dropping out or transferring. Chris no longer lives on campus. However, he ardently echoed

Crystal's sentiments from when he lived on campus and felt unsafe. In the wake of these various incidents participants reported feeling unsafe on their college campus. During these instances, participants questioned their livelihood and whether they should remain at the institution. Theme three consisted of two subthemes: impact of political polarization on college experience and biased incidents against marginalized groups.

**Impact of political polarization on college experience.** The aftermath of the recent presidential election was a common theme of the research participants. Students discussed a great division on campus based on political affiliations and the impact that polarization has had on their student experience and the campus environment. Ellen described an experience she had in the wake of the election where a large group altercation was taking place that frightened her to the point of skipping class that day. Natalie also shared feelings of being unsafe as well.

And like when Trump was elected president I was absolutely terrified to go outside of my dorm at a specific time at night because you have students protesting about to fight and basically right now with all the campus shootings. My computer broke so I have to go to the library to do most of my work but after a certain time I am scared. I'm just scared. I don't, I am scared.

When probed about the single most negative experience he has had at the institution, Chris immediately described the day after the presidential election.

Well, it was the day after Trump was elected. It was this rally. It was a rally of just, I can't even explain it...just chaos. Honestly, that's kind of what made me [check out]. Before then, I was indifferent about this university, but my indifference was more positive than it was negative and after that honestly, I just checked out. I was like I am just going to get my degree and I am going to leave...They were telling us to leave campus if we didn't agree with it and I was like that doesn't even make sense and it doesn't have anything to do with the campus. After that event I was mentally over the university and I checked out.

As a fallout from the presidential election, participants described an increase in incidents that threatened their safety on campus. Additionally, participants depicted a hostile political climate and partisan divide that negatively impacted their student experience.

**Biased incidents against marginalized groups.** Several participants recollected incidents where they felt they were being profiled potentially due to their race. In addition, participants identified encounters where they were called racial slurs and were victims of racism. Crystal recalled an incident where she was studying with a group of friends and they were called the N-word by a White male. She stated that the male and his friends ran off after calling them the racial slur. She was happy because she did not want the incident to escalate to something bigger. Robert also recalled an encounter of being called a racial slur.

Being an African American I do see a lot of segregation and even though it's not completely mentioned it's more social than literally within law. Because being at a PWI I've come to realize there are good people and a lot of bad people. Like during the times of one of the campaigns I think it was either the Ku Klux Klan came or through Donald Trump visiting the campus. I have had

incidents where there was a racial slur thrown at me, towards me and my friends. Like when we came to visit one of our friends, we heard F-U N-word.

Crystal divulged instances of being racially profiled.

You see that [segregation] everywhere all over campus-like everywhere. Not so much with the professors or anything but it's just like the students themselves. And like we go to the store sometimes and if we are coming straight from our classes and we have our backpacks, they be like we got to check y'all backpacks before y'all leave, like we about to steal something from y'all. I am like sure okay. It's just like weird, because I know I didn't have to deal with it, but my ancestors did but now dealing with it in 2018.

One participant noted that he did not expect to have to deal with safety issues when he came to college. He stated, "Especially being here at an institution where you are basically here to learn and get your degree. You are not really worried about your safety as much. But it's starting to become the exact opposite." Similarly, Crystal stated, "I had to go buy pepper spray because I was not playing. I've never had that in my life and now I got it." Finally, Eric shared that although he has experienced racial encounters and profiling at the institution, he feels that it has made him a better person.

You know I feel like this might be controversial but just hear me out. I feel like it helps us from becoming what we hate. And I know for me I was brought up like not to trust White folk. Sort of like in a racist world I guess White people and coming over here and I guess emerging myself in different races and cultures and all that stuff has sort of shown me you know you can't trust everybody obviously but at the same time you can't just shut groups out because of way their ancestors treated you and there are some racist White folk up here, I can't deny that. But not everybody that is White is bad. I feel like it sort of help me from being racist myself.

Participants detailed several instances of biases occurring over the past few months and in recent years. These occurrences have made participants question their safety on their college campus.

#### **Theme Four: Desire for a Supportive Multicultural Campus Environment**

The desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment theme addresses participants' perceptions of the need for a more supportive and diverse campus environment. This theme was developed based on participants' reiterated narratives detailing a lack of a diverse campus environment. Participants described the lack of diversity in regard to the classroom setting and the larger campus community. Additionally, as representatives of students from multicultural backgrounds, participants shared consistent stories of not feeling supported and experiencing segregation amongst their peers. Participants also shared frustration and opposition with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion being defunded. The three subthemes include classroom learning environment, campus culture, and institutional support.

**Classroom learning environment.** The classroom learning environment subtheme addresses participants' perceptions of their experiences in the classroom. When conveying the perceptions of faculty members in their college experience, participants overwhelmingly

described faculty as being fair, equal, professional, and unbiased. Students did not consistently report experiences of being mistreated or receiving privileges based on their status as a first-generation college student of color. When describing treatment from faculty, Crystal shared that she feels that all students are treated the same unless you go to office hours for more one on one time. These sentiments were echoed by several other participants. A second participant, Robert, stated the following:

Faculty show strong support for people of us [color], especially for those that try to make an effort in our classes. And not just effort in their classes but if you visit them at times when they are not as busy, they will just sit down and talk to you. They see a lot of things on campus that they want to change themselves.

Ellen enthusiastically shared her satisfaction and love for the professors in her department.

***No one in my class looks like me.*** The interviews and focus group discussions revealed a lack of racial diversity in the classrooms. All of the eight participants discussed being the only student of their race or ethnicity in their courses and oftentimes being the only student of color. The majority of the participants explained this in a negative manner that had an impact on their student experience. Natalie stated that “being at a PWI, it’s hard at times because I feel like people don’t see what I see.” Lena shared that the experience has been different being the only Asian or most of the time the only minority in her classes. Miguel, filled with emotion, shared an example of one experience when he was the only Hispanic student in his course and how that encounter made him feel.

So, like I remember in my Spanish class, I am the only Hispanic person in my Spanish class, and it is full of White people (is that alright to say). So, I made a joke about a rapper, Bobby Shmurda, and I guess no one knew who he was so everybody kind of stared at me. I was like man this sucks.

Later in the interview when asked about the single most negative experience he has had on campus, Miguel replied being the only Hispanic student in his class and not seeing many Hispanics around campus.

I guess probably just being like one of the only Hispanic students in my class because usually, always all White but there are other cultures and other races, but I barely see Hispanics. But nothing too big I guess. I am the only Hispanic in most of my classes and around campus I will see maybe one or two Hispanics every other day. Like other than that, I don’t see a lot of them.

Crystal also referenced the lack of diversity in her classes and feeling pressure to be a spokesperson for her race and feeling compelled to answer any race-related questions that arise. Chris nonchalantly acknowledged being the only African American in his classes, but he does not let it impact him negatively.

***Same-race faculty makes a difference.*** Participants proclaimed that having a faculty member of the same race did make a difference and aided in their persistence at the institution. One participant stated, “The African American faculty show appreciation. I can definitely say that. That’s one of the main reasons I stay. They make it their business to reach out to us.” Participants reported that they had taken a class taught by a faculty member of the same race

as them, between one and three times. Miguel described an encounter with a Hispanic faculty member that made him feel welcomed and understood at the institution.

My Spanish teacher from last semester, we were talking about one of the assignments and she kind of trailed off and said if I ever need help with anything like finding a mentor or anything she could ask her son to mentor me.

Participants expressed positive feedback regarding the faculty and being treated fairly by them at the university. However, there were concerns expressed over the lack of racial diversity amongst faculty members and peers in the classroom setting.

**Campus culture.** *Campus culture* is the second subtheme. Participants provided an in-depth description of the campus environment and culture. In addition, participants discussed their transition to the college campus. While discussing their transition, half of the participants revealed experiencing culture shock. For example, Miguel explained that at times he feels alienated on campus because he does not feel like he fits in with the majority culture. Miguel also goes on to explain that he did not expect to be surrounded by so many White people. He shared that being a minority around a large number of people from the majority race makes him uncomfortable in the environment. Miguel stated, “Because not to be mean but I kind of get nervous around a lot of them. It’s just weird.” Chris also described feeling an extreme amount of culture shock at the institution. Natalie reflectively shared the challenges she faced during her transition at the university and the impact it had on her mental health. “It was like a prison here...like cut off from people. I didn’t have any friends. I knew about counseling services. I went to one session, but I never went back.” Without being probed or asked about culture shock, Crystal provided details of her experience with culture shock at the university.

I wasn’t expecting a culture shock and I got that, I was just like wow. I look at a lot of things differently now.... So, I knew I was coming here but I am not even going to lie, I didn’t think it was that many White people in the world until I got here.

**Race affinity organizations.** Participants discussed the positive impact of joining race-based organizations and having designated safe spaces for multicultural students on campus had on their student experience. Participants described these designated spaces and groups on campus as providing a welcoming environment where they felt they could be themselves and feel a sense of belonging. Lena mentioned that the single most positive experience she has had at the university was being involved in the Asian American Association. She described the club as being little but very welcoming. Lena later goes on to share that the institution shows an appreciation for her race, ethnicity, and culture by having an office on campus that she feels creates a welcoming space for people that identify with her racial group and other cultures.

**Segregation amongst peers.** A common theme from the interviews was the perception of segregation that participants witnessed among their peers. Seven of the participants described witnessing segregation on their college campus between various racial and ethnic groups. Students mentioned that most students only socialize and form meaningful relationships with same-race peers. A few of the participants also insinuated that there was some segregation within their own race and ethnic group. Ellen stated that “her department does a good job of ensuring that students mingle with one another and across racial boundaries.” However, she does not see that campus-wide. When describing the culture of the campus, Eric vehemently had the following to say: “It’s like segregated almost... Black folk

walking with Black folk. Asian folk walking with Asian folk. White folk walking with White folk. I mean everyone forms these little cliques based off of their skin tone.” Crystal also intensely shared her views regarding her perception of the campus being segregated. When asked about the campus environment she stated “Segregation. It’s like not segregation legally but people do it mentally. They make sure you know they want it to be like that and it’s just weird.”

In reference to their relationships with their peers, a few participants discussed that not only do they feel animosity from peers from the opposite race, but sometimes the hostility is from within their own racial and ethnic groups. Amber stated, “There is so much racism on this campus. Racism from White people and Racism from Black people. Either you’re White or just not Black enough. It’s really hard.” Additionally, Amber described a struggle where she felt like she did not fit in with people outside of her race or within her race.

It’s kind of hard because you see all of these Black girls around here and they want to stand out and look good. I just don’t fit in because I am not Black enough. I don’t go to the parties and I don’t drink, and I don’t smoke. I feel like there is no reason for me to be somewhere I cannot fit in. I can’t hang around White people. There are some people that I can tolerate. Like I can only tolerate this much [hand gesture signaling small amount]. I am a people person, but then again, I am not. It’s like certain stuff I can take because like I say people see things different than I do and I see things different from people do. All the Greek life and Alphas like I can’t do that because I don’t fit in. I just don’t. I mean like I tried to, I just don’t want to be around a whole bunch of people who I know I don’t have anything in common with. I don’t think I am better than anybody, but I know who I am. So I’m not about to sit around with nobody and try to make myself fit in when I know I don’t.

When describing his relationship with his same-race peers, Eric shared, “People of your own race will judge you just because your hair is different or you’re big or small.” Chris shared similar sentiments when describing his feelings regarding his relationship with his peers.

Indifferent. It’s kind of like the phrase: if it’s not one thing, then it’s another. If it’s not African Americans at a PWI, it turns into African Americans versus African Americans. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. Like I told my friend a few days ago, I am just coasting and riding the waves until I can leave.

Participants described their views of the campus culture and some of the challenges they encountered with their peers. Participants also disclosed the important role that identity-based groups and spaces have on their college experience.

**Institutional support.** The institutional support subtheme describes participants’ perceptions of the administration’s support and encouragement of a supportive multicultural campus environment. In his interview, without being prompted, Chris vocalized a feeling of a lack of support from the institution.

Honestly, I just feel like for the longest I’ve just been by myself, meaning no support from the school. I just feel like I have to fight the fight on my own and even though that’s not true because I have plenty of people at the school that support me, but it’s not enough where I want to feel comfortable.

Eric had the following to share regarding the institution's support for students of color.

There's all this talk about minority support on campus. I mean we have the Black Cultural Center. I honestly have not even been in there if I'm being honest. I feel like there are a lot of groups and organizations that are tailored to each individual major for like minorities but as far as advocacy or just trying to spread knowledge about different cultures, I don't really see it. It's like segregated almost. You have some White folk up here that tries to learn about other cultures and some minorities that try to learn about other cultures as well, but I don't see a collective program or event or group, besides the Cultural and Diversity Fair, that tries to get people to understand each other.

When probed about the institution demonstrating an appreciation for her racial and ethnic background and culture, Natalie shared the following:

I don't feel like this institution makes a place for Black students to stand out. Like I said, either you are not White or you are just not Black enough. I feel like there are Black organizations on this campus, but I just do not fit in. There are also White organizations that I don't fit in with because the way I see things are completely different from the way other see things.

Ellen shared that she sees an appreciation for different cultures within her department but not from the institution in general.

As a Linguistics major we talk about other people's culture and a lot of about other people's language a lot more than other classes and departments on campus, so I don't ever feel like, even though there is not a lot of. I feel like there is not more diversity, it's not like a very diverse group, it's just more accepting of diversity. Like overall I feel like everyone is really chill and accepting and I can basically say anything that's not dramatic and they would say yes that is an interesting viewpoint, let's talk more about it. Like that is cool that you have that to bring to the table.

**Challenges with communication.** Various participants expressed a concern regarding the lack of timely communication received from the university in instances where they felt should have included more timely and transparent communications. Ellen adamantly stated discontent regarding the lack of communication around the rumors of a school shooting occurring and she stated, "And they condemn the students for like telling other people. Like University PD was mad that students had been texting people and passing this along."

As documented from the statements above, participants did not perceive support and encouragement from upper-administration at the institution and some discussed challenges with communication. In this subtheme, participants shared their perceptions of the administration's support and the need for better communication. Participants expressed a desire for a more supportive multicultural campus environment.

## Discussion

First-generation college students of color described their experiences at a PWI as a complex phenomenon. The participants' stories revealed four major themes to include college degree is a means to a better lifestyle, money always matters, heightened sense of safety

concerns exists, and desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment. The students expressed gratitude for the opportunity to study at a well-known university where they are afforded a high-quality education. Nonetheless, the participants shared several instances of challenges they have encountered that negatively impacted their student experiences at their institution and threatened their sense of safety. The literature presents an abundance of reasons why students of color struggle on predominantly White campuses and the challenges that they encounter as first-generation college students of color and these challenges were reiterated by participants in this study. For example, reliance on race-based affinity groups and designated cultural, race, and ethnic affinity spaces to provide them a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and safety were denoted in the literature and these challenges were experienced by the participants in this study. These findings also supported the literature in that first-generation college students share a common set of challenges, such as being more likely to come from low-income families, identify as a racial minority, are less prepared academically for college, report more feelings of marginalization, and experience greater cultural difficulties and participants in this study expressed these same experiences.

A finding of interest on the positive side is that despite the challenges faced on their college campus, participants value the relationships and connections they have formed at the institution, they raved about the quality of the education they were receiving, they were thankful for the opportunity to receive a higher education from a well-known institution, and they all expected to graduate from the university.

A finding of interest on the challenging side was that there was insinuation that the campus was segregated as a whole, but as well as among peers within their own race and ethnic group. A reference was made to segregation occurring “not segregation legally but people do it mentally.” This finding may suggest students were referring to self-segregation. “Self-segregation is typically viewed as a form of social isolation that is a serious barrier to the adaptation process at the host institution, and most educational scholars concur that positive social interaction with American host nationals increases international students’ general level of satisfaction with their educational experiences” (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Thus, the notion of self-segregation warrants further research.

This study granted participants an opportunity to share their lived experiences integrating into the institutional culture of a PWI. In addition, this research study may afford administrators an opportunity to hear the voices and stories of their students, which may be useful in the future planning and discussion of first-generation college students of color experiences at PWIs. The first-generation college students of color in this study came from low-income backgrounds and overcame many obstacles prior to attending college. However, once enrolled, students have the motivation to complete their college degree in order to have access to better opportunities in life. Additionally, these students experienced safety issues, racism, and biases on their college campus, which has resulted in a strong desire for a more supportive multicultural campus environment. To attain this according to participants, institutions need to further promote programming that supports this notion of multiculturalism. For example, participants noted the importance of programs that focus on providing a more supportive and diverse campus environment. The voices of these first-generation college students of color contribute further to the literature by sharing ways they experienced college and their persistence to graduation.

As universities continue to make significant progress in diversifying their campuses, they will continue to see an increase in the enrollment of underrepresented populations, such as first-generation college students of color who are traditionally retained at lower rates. Furthermore, as institutions continue to compete for scarce resources and state funding and other resource allocations are increasingly being linked to retention rates, there will continue to be a need to better understand this student population in terms of student persistence and

retention. In order for administrators to successfully retain these students until degree completion, they must first be aware of the social, financial, and cultural barriers that impede their progress. Leaders of institutions of higher education must ensure that first-generation college students of color are provided both access and support to progress through to degree completion. Without the necessary support programs in place, first-generation college students of color are less likely to persist in institutions of higher education and less likely to be retained until degree completion. All students, regardless of generational status, socioeconomic status, or racial and ethnic backgrounds, should feel like valued and inclusive members of their college community. Kuh (2001) noted that it will take a web of interlocking initiatives to shape an institutional culture of student success and it is up to institutional leaders to create this environment, and this study, further supports that implication.

The findings from this study have several implications for higher education faculty, staff, administrators, and policymakers to better recruit, retain, and support first-generation students of color on college campuses. Higher education administrators could use these findings to improve persistence to graduation, student satisfaction, and sense of belonging in first-generation college students of color by hiring and retaining diverse faculty, staff, and administrators; ensuring college is affordable for students from low-income backgrounds; implementing and maintaining academic, social, financial, and cultural support programs, spaces, and initiatives aimed at recruiting, retaining, and supporting diverse student populations and their multiple identities; and educating and training faculty, staff, and students on race and diversity in higher education.

The researchers acknowledge that this study was not without limitations. The first limitation was the use of student volunteers to participate in the study as this may have resulted in first-generation college students who were more motivated and engaged and not characteristic of the typical first-generation student. A second limitation of the study was that the researchers chose only to interview first-generation students of color. Therefore, the story of students in the majority racial group was not explored or conveyed. Thirdly, the study was limited to only one site, and the researchers selected that site due to accessibility. Therefore, the findings from this research study may not be generalizable to other institutions. Lastly, a vital responsibility of the researchers is to consider ethical considerations and the researchers were aware of potential ethical issues and attempted to avoid them during all stages of this research.

Using the findings from this research study, the researchers recommends the following for future research: (1) Future research should extend this research by including first-generation college students of color from various PWIs that vary in size and geographical locations; (2) Future research should examine the intersectionality of first-generation status with race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status; (3) A future study should conduct a follow-up longitudinal study to follow a select group of first-generation college students' experiences from completing the college application, to enrollment, through matriculation at their institution; and (4) Future researchers should consider telling the stories of those first-generation college students of color who have prematurely departed prior to degree completion.

## References

- Bial, D. (2016, March 30). Diversity in the workplace starts with diversity in higher education. *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/schoolboard/2016/03/30/diversity-in-the-workplace-starts-with-diversity-in-higher-education/#47354b177ee2>
- Caltaldi, E. F., Bennett, C. T., & Chen, X. (2018). *First-generation students: College access, persistence and postbachelor's outcomes* (NCES 2018-421). Stats in Brief, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

- Chen, D. P., Ingram, T. N., & Davis, L. K. (2014). Bridging student engagement and satisfaction: A comparison between historically black colleges and universities and predominantly White institutions. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 83(4), 565-579.
- Choy, S. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment* (NCES 2001-126). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf>
- Coffman, S. (2011). A social constructionist view of issues confronting first-generation college students. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, 2011(127), 81-90. doi:10.1002/tl.459
- Colby, S. L., & Ortman, J. M. (2014). *Projections of the size and composition of the U.S. population: 2014 to 2060, current population reports*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.  
<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Darling, R. A., & Smith, M. S. (2007). First-generation college students: First-year challenges. In M. S. Hunter, B. McCalla-Wriggins, & E. R. White (Eds.), *Academic advising: New insights for teaching and learning in the first year* (pp. 203-211). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Davidson, W. B., Beck, H. P., & Milligan, M. (2009). The college persistence questionnaire: Development and validation of an instrument that predicts student attrition. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(4), 373-390.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Eddles-Hirsch, K. (2015). Phenomenology and educational research. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 3(8), 251-260.
- Frey, W. H. (2015). The browning of America. *Milken Institute Review*.  
<http://www.milkenreview.org/articles/charticle-3>
- Fries-Britt, S. L., & Turner, B. (2001). Facing stereotypes: A case study of black student on a white campus. *Journal of College Student Development*, 42(5), 420-429.
- Gray, B., Johnson, T., Kish-Gephart, J., & Tilton, J. (2017). Identity work by first-generation college students to counteract class-based microaggressions. *Organization Studies*, 39(9), 1227-1250.
- Harackiewicz, J. M., Canning, E. A., Tibbetts, Y., Giffen, C. J., Blair, S. S., Rouse, D. I., & Hyde, J. S. (2014). Closing the social class achievement gap for first-generation students in undergraduate biology. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 106(2), 375-389.
- Havlik, S., Malott, K., Pulliam, N., & Steen, S. (2017). Strengths and struggles: First-generation college goers persisting at one predominantly white institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 0(0), 1-23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117724551>
- Jones, V. A., & Reddick, R. J. (2017). The heterogeneity of resistance: How Black students utilize engagement and activism to challenge PWI inequalities. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86(3), 204-219.
- Keenan, J. F. (2015). *University ethics: How colleges can build and benefit from a culture of ethics*. Lanham, MD: Bowman & Littlefield.
- Kuh, G. D. (2001). Organizational culture and student persistence: Prospects and puzzles. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 3(1), 23-29.

- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540-563.
- Kuh, G. D., & Love, P. G. (2000). A cultural perspective on student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 196-212). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Lightweis, S. (2014). The challenges, persistence, and success of white, working-class, first-generation college students. *College Student Journal*, 48(3), 461-467.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lowery-Hart, R., & Pacheco, G. (2011). Understanding the first-generation student experience in higher education through a relational dialectic perspective. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, 2011(127), 55-68. doi:10.1002/tl.457
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Peteet, B. J., Montgomery, L., & Weekes, J. C. (2015). Predictors of imposter phenomenon among talented ethnic minority undergraduate students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 84(2), 175-186.
- Pratt, I. S., Harwood, H. B., & Cavazos, J. T., Ditzfeld, C. P. (2017). Should I stay or should I go? Retention in first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 0(0), 1-14.
- Rose-Redwood, C. R., & Rose-Redwood, R. S. (2013). Self-segregation or global mixing? Social interactions and the international student experience. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(4), 413-429.
- Slaughter, J. B. (1988). From isolation to mainstream: An institutional commitment. In M. C. Terrell, II, & D. J. Wright (Eds.). *From survival to success: Promoting minority student retention [Monograph]*. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 9, xi-xv.
- Soria, K. M., & Stebleton, M. J. (2012). First-generation students' academic engagement and retention. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(6), 673-685. doi:10.1080/13562517.2012.666735
- Stebleton, M. J., & Soria, K. M. (2012). Breaking down barriers: Academic obstacles of first-generation students at research universities. *Learning Assistance Review*, 17(2), 7-20.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 102(6), 1178-1197. doi:10.1037/a0027143
- Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., & Destin, M. (2014). Closing the social-class achievement gap: A difference-education intervention improves first-generation students' academic performance and all students' college transition. *Psychological Science*, 25(4), 943-953. doi:10.1177/0956797613518349
- Stuber, J. M. (2011). Integrated, marginal, and resilient: Race, class, and the diverse experiences of white first-generation college students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(1), 117-136.

- Sundstrom, R. (2008). Racism and the political romance of the browning of America. *Philosophy*, 47, 295-302. <http://repository.usfca.edu/phil/47>
- Swanbrow-Becker, M., Schelbe, L., Romano, K., & Spinelli, C. (2017). Promoting first-generation college students' mental well-being: Student perceptions of an academic enrichment program. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(8), 1166-1183.
- Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1995). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education*, 37, 1-22.
- Tibbetts, Y., Harackiewicz, J., Canning, E., Boston, J., Priniski, S., Hyde, J., & Smith, Eliot R. (2016). Affirming independence: Exploring mechanisms underlying a values affirmation intervention for first-generation students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 110(5), 635-659.
- Turner, C. (1994). Guests in someone else's house: Students of color. *The Review of Higher Education*, 17(4), 355-370.
- VanTassel-Baska, J., Stambaugh, T., & Hébert, P. (2018). An examination of high-achieving first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 62(1), 96-110.
- Watson, L. W., Cuyjet, M., Wright, D. J., & Terrell, M. C. (2002). *How minority students experience college: Implications for planning and policy*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Wibrowski, C. R., Matthews, W. K., & Kitsantas, A. (2017). The role of a skills learning support program on first-generation college students' self-regulation, motivation, and academic achievement: A longitudinal study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 317-332.
- Whitehead, P., & Wright, R. (2017). Becoming a college student: An empirical phenomenological analysis of first generation college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 41(10), 639-651.
- Wong, K. L. (2016). Building capacity for inclusion by working across differences: An institutional and societal imperative. *Diversity and Democracy*, 19(2). <https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2016/spring/wonglau>

### Author Note

Talisha Lawson Adams University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Division of Academic Success and Transitions, Assistant Director of Student Success Center [tlawso11@utk.edu](mailto:tlawso11@utk.edu).

\*Juliann Sergi McBrayer Georgia Southern University, College of Education, Department of Leadership, Technology and Human Development, Assistant Professor Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [jmcbrayer@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:jmcbrayer@georgiasouthern.edu).

\*Corresponding Author

Copyright 2020: Talisha Lawson Adams, Juliann Sergi McBrayer, and Nova Southeastern University.

### Article Citation

Adams, T. L., & McBrayer, J. S. (2020). The lived experiences of first-generation college students of color integrating into the institutional culture of a predominantly white institution. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 733-757. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss3/12>

---