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The influence of social capital on first-generation African American gradaute students: a grounded theory

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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON FIRST-GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICAN GRADAUTE STUDENTS: A GROUNDED THEORY

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A

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Abstract

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ON FIRST-GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICA GRADUATE STUDENTS: A GROUNDED THEORY

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First-generation African American/Black graduate students face challenges that must be overcome if they are to persist to degree completion. However, literature on factors contributing to their success and circumstances that hinder their academic outcomes is sparse. This qualitative grounded theory study investigated social capital and its influence on first-generation African American/Black graduate students' success. Participants (n = 17) were purposefully selected and included students who were enrolled or had already graduated, and others who had withdrawn from their graduate program. Thematic analysis of 17 interviews identified three primary themes: support within an academic setting, external support outside of an educational environment, and spirituality. Similar cultural experiences, close friendships, emotional support, and spirituality influenced participants' connection to other students. Participants felt more supported and were more trusting when they received personalized direction, affirming interactions, and empathic responses from faculty and administrative staff. Spirituality is a sense of sacred matters, purpose, and oneness with God. Spirituality was important as spiritual networks encouraged participants to persevere and rely on communal resources. Spiritual resources aligned with participants' values and helped them cope with academic stressors. For first-generation African American/Black students, hindrances included subtle negative behaviors directed at their culture, competence, and values, including stereotype biases and a lack of supportive focus on their needs. Peer interactions

occurred inside the classroom, which led to feelings of distrust and emotionally unsafe environments. Participants who did not complete their graduate program described experiences that diverged from the experiences of the persisting and already graduated students. Students who did not persist described receiving insufficient support while pursuing their professional degrees, lacking balance and spiritual guidance, and being less inclined to connect to supportive networks. When faculty and staff did not address unsuccessful participants' needs, participants were consequently less comfortable creating social networks and eventually withdrew from their program. Successful participants endured circumstances that led to distrust and feeling emotionally vulnerable. Their success was primarily due to connections with others within a strong network and spirituality that guided their emotional and mental health and led to enriched academic development.

Keywords: Family Therapy, Systems, African American, First-Generation Student, Graduate Education

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Chapter I

The Problem and Justification of the Study

From 2010 to 2019, the rate of Black high school completers enrolling in college decreased from 66% to 57%. By comparison, 82% of Asian, 69% of White, and 64% of Hispanic high school completers enrolled in college in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Approximately 10% of Black college students graduated with a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a), and only 22% completed a graduate or professional school degree beyond a baccalaureate (National Center for Education Statistics, June 2020b, 2020c).

Social capital researchers attribute the low rate of achievement among African American/Black students to having an inadequate social system to facilitate academic growth and development. Research on first-generation African American students in higher education focuses on undergraduate students' needs, neglecting graduate and professional students altogether (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Felder (2010) and Haskins et al. (2013) describe African American/Black graduate students' experiences but do not explain causes for those experiences or how to improve them. This study aims to explain the experiences of first- generation African American/Black graduate students, factors that influence their development, and how to improve their development and success.

Social capital is essential in establishing and creating lasting and meaningful networks of relationships that connect individuals to material or symbolic goods (Bourdieu, 1986). The operational definition of *social capital* is network relationships that promote socially enriching systemic interactions and opportunities. Networks help individuals, enhancing their functioning and aiding them to function effectively within a system (Coleman, 1988). *Bonding social capital* is shared feelings, values, experiences, and interactions. *Bridging social capital* is how well and comfortable individuals feel about seeking assistance outside a network (Wooley et al., 2008).

Through socially enriching networks, nurturing relationships and resources manifest. Social capital theory comprises dimensions and principles. *Dimensions* are the factors that determine functionality within a system (Lin, 2001). Social capital dimensions comprise of functionality and positionality of individuals within a system (Lin, 2001). This study explores the position and functionality of networks as they determine the relevance of relationships within a network contributing to successful outcomes. *Principles* are fundamental ways of being, rules of engagement, or conduct within networks (Lin, 2001). Principles include trust, reciprocity, creating and establishing expectations, and creating and enforcing norms within relationships (Coleman, 1988).

First-generation students are at a greater risk before beginning their educational careers. Students who pursue post-secondary education are more susceptible to roadblocks that impact their academic development. Disadvantages for students who are first in their family to pursue post-secondary education include being a first-generation student, caring for family members while in school, family responsibilities that become distractions from coursework, overextending and working more than 30 hours a week, and insufficient parental financial support (Engle & Tinto, 2006; Engle et al., 2006). Moreover, many African American/Black students care for family members and worry about balancing work and school expenses in higher education. First-generation African American/Black students experience educational disadvantages without having adequate social capital to facilitate academic growth and development (Engle & Tinto, 2006; Engle et al., 2006).

Social capital theory asserts that when trustworthy networks are created within a system, and individuals become a part of networks that facilitate growth and development, risks and challenges become manageable. Social capital theorists claim that networks of relationships are critical to individuals' effective functioning because they advocate for individuals within a given

system (Coleman, 1988). The extent of social capital networks influences the significance of an alliance, which determines student outcomes Lin (1999). Available literature about African American students focuses on primary education and social capital, mentoring African American students, and African American students' experiences in college (Patton & Harper, 2003). No literature examines social capital and first-generation African American/Black graduate students' success. Nor is there research investigating factors that contribute to and impede academic outcomes of African American/Black students who are first in their families to pursue a graduate degree. This study is the first to employ grounded theory methods to explain the influences of social capital on first-generation African American/Black graduate students' academic success. This research also provides new knowledge regarding systemic contributors to success for African American and Black students who are the first in their families to pursue a graduate education.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, African American/Black students have been marginalized, oppressed, and ostracized. Professionals have denigrated first-generation Black students' intellectual abilities and academic outcomes. First-generation African American/Black students are at risk of enduring perpetual obstacles inhibiting equitable outcomes due to unfair criticism and treatment, including systemic racism. Research on first-generation and African American/Black students in primary, secondary, and undergraduate education focuses on comparing them to other racial groups. Comparison literature contributes to negative perceptions about students of color and those who are the first in their families to pursue higher education (Barfield et al., 2012). More recent literature about African American/Black, and first-generation graduates primarily focusses on mentoring and highlighting students' experiences. Up-to-date research overlooks a gap in the literature regarding inequities in first-generation African American/Black graduate students' experiences and how to improve them (Felder, 2010). Exploring institutional change to support students first in their

families to attend graduate school can improve their outcomes. By understanding how to support the needs of first-generation African American/Black graduate and professional degree students, micro and macro institutional change may improve systemic interactions and eradicate systemic racism and inequities faced by this population.

The Rationale for The Study

Supporting first-generation African American/Black professional degree students is vital to their academic success. Graduate programs must develop ways to meet this population's needs through social capital and systemic means. This study is critical because it focuses on a systemic approach to explaining support in higher education. It explains interconnecting factors that promote first-generation African American/Black graduate students' development and success.

Social capital support is pertinent in this study. It informs foundational support necessary when attending to first-generation African American/Black graduate students' needs. This study is essential as it provides insight into the pitfalls of insufficient systemic support while investigating support contributors for the study's population. This study emphasizes the relevance of social capital in facilitating systemic support for first-generation African American/Black graduate students.

Limitations

Limitations are inevitable in every research study. There are three salient limitations that this study has acknowledged, which are: self-reported data, time constraints, and sampling methods. First, this study collected qualitative data and self-reported past experiences during semi-structured interviews. Self-reported data can be ambiguous because the researcher relies on the participant's memory of past events. Also, how participants disclose their academic experiences may skew self-reported data. Participants may attempt to make their experiences appear more appealing in the study and elaborate or omit details. Second, this dissertation study used purposive

sampling from various sources. This sampling methodology is a great way to ensure that the researcher is interviewing participants who are a good fit. It also limits the population and therefore assures that this study is generalizable to this research's specific population and purposes. Lastly, time constraints are a limitation because there is inadequate time to pursue this topic further in a longitudinal study. To further examine the success of first- generation populations of all ethnicities, the researcher would need more time to travel and collect data from various communities.

Self of the Researcher

Qualitative research studies will inevitably reflect the researcher. The researcher examined herself and the research topic, exploring her reflexive stance. The researcher must reflect on their assumptions and biases to not undermine the research while analyzing the data. Reflecting on personal beliefs is the practice of bracketing. *Bracketing* is using systematic reflexivity to maintain objectivity throughout a research study (Birks & Mills, 2015). In qualitative research, the researcher exercises self-awareness of insensitivities through systemic reflexivity. *Memoing* is a process of "recording processes, thoughts, feelings, analytical insights, and decisions and ideas concerning the research" (Birks & Mills, 2015). Researchers' memos occur throughout the research project to guide the design. Afterward, the researcher uses notes, ideas, and observations through memoing as insights to guide the research. Examining identity, perspective, unconscious biases, and blind spots allow sound methodology that confirms rich data without letting the researcher's disposition undermine the investigation.

I am a first-generation African American graduate student who earned a master's degree in marital and family therapy and is pursuing a doctorate in this field of study. Both degree programs were at private universities in the southern region of the United States of America. Both universities were unique in what they offered and how they supported academics. Both universities

were unique in what they offered and how they supported academics. Both universities had at least one minority faculty on staff.

I selected the marriage and family therapy master's program, from which I graduated in 2010, for several reasons. While away from my home state, I needed to establish bonds with others that fostered support beyond the university. I believed I would receive diverse and culturally sensitive support and positive interactions from faculty and staff that would aid my academic development and goals. I chose the master's program because of the presence of an esteemed professor whose background appeared to be similar to mine. Others held this professor in high regard. I anticipated the encouraging words and supportive interactions from this faculty member and her network. As expected, I felt supported in my academic endeavors due to prior conversations with the educational program staff. Several professors, including a program director, created a bond with me in the family therapy program. They attended to my socio- cultural and mental health needs. Professors who listened to my needs were primarily minority faculty. There were also non-minority faculty with whom I formed relationships. In creating a bond with professors, I established and developed norms and expectations that helped define the extent of my relationship with them and normalize my position in higher education. The faculty and staff validated me and encouraged the development of my academic and professional skills. As a student connecting through academically rich and professional associations, I felt enriched through my experiences of learning more about systemic and socio-cultural contexts and their impact on my success. I recall learning about honoring myself and overcoming challenges in higher education when I sought guidance from professors who supported my personal and academic goals. They normalized their role in my life and co-constructed mutually respectful spaces by referring to themselves by their first name instead of requiring more formal titles. The faculty practice of

referring to themselves by their first name symbolized mutual respect while inadvertently challenging southern beliefs, hierarchical roles, and authority expectations.

During the master's degree program for marriage and family therapy, all faculty members were not as encouraging. The esteemed professor, previously mentioned, refused to provide any form of support to me. The professor ignored requests for assistance, belittled me, and excluded me from beneficial conversations inside and outside the classroom. This experience left an impression that impaired my mental, spiritual, and academic development.

I have had similar experiences with others in the doctorate program as in the master's program. While the doctoral program is small, faculty and staff at the university have assisted me in accessing writing centers, academic success coaches, and research essentials. The faculty and staff in the doctoral program assisted me by providing me with tools that helped develop me, strengthening my writing and research skills. Although support was not as profound as my master's degree program or tailored to my academic, cultural, and personal needs, peers helped encourage me. Peers supported me emotionally and spiritually at pivotal moments during my doctoral career, such as when I experienced academic probation. Peers and I co-constructed safe spaces to voice our concerns, pray, and cope with obstacles.

Although I am grateful for all I have endured in the doctoral program, I have had similar unfavorable encounters as my master's. Adverse experiences have affected my research progression, growth, and overall success. The crippling experiences I endured left me feeling belittled, rejected, and ostracized. Those experiences influenced my sense of self-efficacy and hindered my academic progress.

During my master's and doctoral experiences as a student, I encountered supportive and non-supportive experiences, which helped me develop ways to process negative encounters. Supportive encounters contributed to me conceptualizing coursework without biases. It helped me

to process without allowing my subjective opinion to overwhelm my perception. Due to supportive faculty, experiencing negative encounters helped me develop coping skills that enhanced self-reflection. Unpleasant encounters helped me to practice processes distressing events subjectively and objectively. Overall, processing past experiences gave me the tools needed to utilize reflexivity in this study while validating participants' truths and emerging data in this study.

Definitions of Terms

Below are operational definitions of the major terms that are used throughout this study.

African American and Black

African American and Black is used interchangeably to be consistent with one's race, ethnicity, and nationality. This term includes individuals who genetically identify with African ancestry, heritage, race, and African American nationality. This term encompasses individuals who identify with African American or Black culture. African American students are those who self-identify with African American heritage, Black race, or has one or more biological parent(s) who self-identifies with African American ancestry.

Academic Personnel

Academic personnel is used interchangeably with institutional agents, faculty, and administrative staff. This term refers to individuals that bridge social capital connections between neighborhood residents or informal, supportive persons, external groups, or organizations.

Bonding Social Capital

Bonding social capital refer to shared feelings, values, experiences, and interactions among others (Woolley et al., 2008).

Bracketing

Bracketing is the use of reflections by the researcher to maintain objectivity or reflexivity by recording assumptions, biases, thoughts, ideas, and feelings (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Bridging Social Capital

Bridging social capital refer to how well and comfortable individuals feel about seeking assistance outside of a network (Wooley et al., 2008).

Cumulative Disadvantages

Cumulative disadvantages are risks that impact the course of academic progress and determine opportunity, equitability, and outcome in educational settings.

Fictive Kin

Fictive kin is used interchangeably with extended family, extended family network, 'play sibling'; and wolf pack. This term refers to individuals within an interdependent network, relationship, or network of relationships that fosters mutual aid; and emotional, mental, spiritual, and financial support within the established group (Martin & Martin, 1978). Fictive kin is determined by the group in which the relationship exists.

First-Generation Students

First-generation students are students whose parents did not obtain a higher education or graduate degree.

Graduate Degree

Graduate degree is used interchangeably with professional degree in this study. This term refers to a degree program that offers master's, doctoral, or terminal degree coursework and issues conferred degrees in higher education. This type of degree is one that is beyond the bachelor's degree, including titles M.A., M.S., J.D., M.D., and Ph.D.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a form of qualitative research developed to explain social processes and why things or phenomenon happen (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Memoing

Memoing is a method that the researcher uses to record processes, thoughts, feelings, analytical insights, and decisions and ideas about research as it is taking place (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Mentoring

Mentoring is the act of guiding, coaching, or advising someone (Patton & Harper, 2003).

Network

Network is a group of interconnecting people with shared goals, values, and purpose.

Non-Completing

Non-completing is a term used interchangeably with non-successful and describes students that did not obtain a graduate or terminal degree. This term is consistent with participants level of successful degree attainment. This term refers to participants who did not complete their program of study and had no immediate plans to complete their degree program of study.

Reactive Support

Reactive support is support that is not readily provided. This term refer to support that does not address the needs of students of color or broach sensitive topics concerning students of color (Haskins et al., 2013).

Resources

Resources are valued goods that promote individual success (Lin, 2001).

Social Capital

Social capital refers to networks of relationships that promote socially enriching systemic interactions and opportunities that help individuals, enhancing how they function and aiding them to function effectively within a system (Lin, 2001).

Social Capital Support

Social capital support refers to social capital that facilitates, supports, and promotes educational development and success. (Coleman, 1988).

Spiritual Resources

Spiritual resources are tangible and intangible items, goods, and texts that focus on sacred matters, individual success, and self-preservation (Lin, 2001).

Spirituality

Spirituality is considered sacred matters. This term describes a sense of purpose and oneness with God; and a higher being and oneness with others and God.

Tokenized

Tokenized describes when an African American or Black person is perceived as a representative of an entire group of people or racial and ethnic group. (Haskins et al., 2013).

Chapter II

Literature Review

First-generation African American graduate students are trailblazers of higher education in their families of origin. These students enter educational programs with risks and disadvantages without an adequate support system. There is some literature about African American college students and their negative experiences (Felder, 2010). Literature about first-generation students highlights community and developmental programs that aid their success. However, there is little research about first-generation African American graduate students, their experience, how to help reduce negative and non-accommodating experiences, and the influences of social capital and systemic support for this population. This chapter discusses research on social capital and African American and first-generation students in higher education.

Social Capital Research

Qualitative and quantitative social capital literature about first-generation African American students in higher education encompasses this section, social capital research. Social capital research highlights systemic functions through network activity and support. Below is an overview of empirical research on social capital, emphasizing social capital networks and supports.

Research on Social Capital

There are also references to research studies that used both a qualitative and quantitative design, a mixed method study, to investigate first-generation, African American, and graduate students' academic experiences. Social capital principles are the building blocks for enhanced social capital. They include trust, honesty, information potential, reciprocity, establishing and creating norms and expectations, and social ties within a system or interconnecting network. Principles such as trust and building bonds within a system foster support at predominately White institutions (Museus & Neville, 2012). In Museus and Neville's (2012) qualitative phenomenology

study, 60 students of color enrolled in college participated in semi-structured, 60-90 minute in-person interviews. The interviews were about key institutional agents' influences on minority students' access to social capital. Overall, the study concluded that institutional agents tremendously influence access to social capital. Connecting to institutional agents leads to enhanced social capital. Creating bonds with faculty and staff enhanced social capital by allowing students to engage in foundational principles of social capital. Fundamental principles include developing trust, considering honesty and honest interactions with others, and receiving information, such as resources, regarding future success while maintaining membership in a supportive network. Social networks provide access to social resources and information not otherwise shared without having close relationships or closures with faculty and staff. Museus and Neville emphasized closures or close-knit relationships that promote students' positive development. Creating bonds with institutional agents is vital to the success of students of color as bonds created through social capital networks foster proactive, holistic support, common cultural ground, and faculty authenticity. All of these are essential for minority students to thrive, graduate, and achieve academic and personal success.

Enhanced social capital in academia occurs through students integrating into academic environments, establishing trusting relationships, understanding expectations, and feeling comfortable collaborating with others within an educational community (Stolle-McAllister, 2011). Stolle-McAlister's (2011) qualitative grounded theory study comprised 134 doctoral degree students enrolled in a Meyerhoff summer bridge program for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Focus groups were used to understand the importance of pre- college programs as they provide access to social capital. Within cohesive, multilayered support structures, minority students were encouraged to utilize the social capital provided. Within these social capital networks, African American students were comfortable communicating their needs, improving

their social skills, and developing trusting relationships that uplift and inspire them throughout their academic careers (Stolle-McAllister, 2011).

The connected scholars' program (CSP), at a public, urban, and primarily commuter campus university in the Northeast, is a valuable program offered to first-generation college students to help with enhancing development through various connections without creating a formal relationship. It aims to instill principles for success. Principles for success include cultivating skills to develop and nurture relationships with multiple networks that could help achieve successful outcomes. The connected scholars' program promotes enhancing social capital networks by encouraging first-generation students to seek support through establishing relationships and empowering them to persist despite disadvantages and obstacles, improving their self-efficacy (Schwartz et al., 2017).

The study by Schwartz et al. (2017) indicated that first-generation students who participated in college-based interventions within programs, such as CSP, had enhanced social capital because of their different perspectives regarding seeking support and establishing bonds with institutional agents. Enhanced social capital resulted in higher grade point averages and success for minority doctoral students. Although formal relationships are not the focus of CSP and most community programs, students in the program had closer relationships with institutional agents. Students recalled past discussions with CSP instructors that resonated with them. Institutional agents provided unsolicited support regarding students' needs, contributing to vital conversations that because a valuable resource for CSP participants. After graduating from CSP, students' conversations with instructors while they were in CSP became a valuable resource as CSP staff turned college guidance counselors who provided unsolicited support regarding students' needs. Due to instructors attending to first-generation college students' needs, students felt comfortable with maintaining contact with them, decreasing the likelihood of avoiding potential support

networks. Reducing help-seeking avoidance is important as first-generation students have felt excluded and scrutinized in college environments, contributing to deficient social capital networks and poor academic achievement. Schwartz et al. also concluded that first- generation minority college students did not avoid staff who could help them with enhanced social capital. The attitudes and behaviors of students in CSP were different compared to others not enrolled. Like many other first-generation African American college students, CSP enrollees experienced frustrating times where faculty appeared to be burdened with tasks, unobliging, and harmful. However, graduates of the CSP intervention program believed that due to the program instilling skills to seek other resources and empowering them to discuss their needs with other supportive faculty, negative encounters did not lead to negative attitudes and behaviors.

Social capital occurs as people within a social support network continue to work together toward a greater goal, including individual successes. Social capital networks establish strong support structures for minority college students. The networks foster community, supports intersectionality, and honor communal values, shaping their educational experiences (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). In Greyerbiehl and Mitchell's (2014) qualitative constructivist phenomenological study, seven first and second-generation African American college women who were members of a historically Black sorority and enrolled at a large public predominately White institution (PWI) participated in a focus group and a series of one-on-one semi-structured interviews regarding intersections of race and gender, how it influenced their experiences, and intersectionality and how Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLO) provided social support at PWIs. Affirming intersections is vital to students' development in post-secondary education. Greyerbiehl & Mitchell concluded that Black women perceived sororities as intrinsically supportive groups. Sororities affirm their identity as women, Black, and Black women at PWIs. Sororities are the most helpful network group, more beneficial than any other organization at PWIs.

Sorority support networks are places of refuge where students can be themselves and not viewed as representative of Black culture. In this way, sororities affirmed African American college students' voices. They provide a safe space and platform for their voices to be heard and valued, which contributes to belonging and strengthens persistence. The study also found that African American women sought BGLOs to fulfill a family legacy. Fulfilling family legacy was important to these students as they wanted to capitalize on opportunities awarded to them by family members of BGLOs. Also, access to a more extensive social network awarded opportunities to foster positive growth, a culture of high standards and expectations, and positive academic pressure to persist and move toward academic achievement, which led to their success. Overall, Greyerbiehl and Mitchell highlighted sororities as instruments of social capital networks for African American women in college that promote intersectionality and aid in student success.

Research That Emphasizes Social Capital Networks and Support

Social capital research includes different dimensions. This section contains more in-depth information regarding mentoring, advising, spirituality, and social support as they all relate to social capital. Mentoring is guiding, coaching, or advising someone (Patton & Harper, 2003). Academic mentoring and advising are vital in establishing a point of contact and guidance for students. Points of contact include advisors, mentors, institutional agents such as faculty, supportive development programs, and any entity that provides support or direction. Patton and Harper (2003) report that points of contact are important to African American women graduates students' personal and educational growth and professional development. It is also vital for facilitating positive and successful experiences and social mobility.

Mentoring increases retention and persistence in African American college students. When mentoring relationships are positive and sensitive to intersectional sociocultural needs, students of color succeed (Dahlvig, 2010). Minority populations endure academic cultures that do not honor

their unique needs, interfering with their development and disrupting their overall success. Qualitative grounded theory studies, such as Dahlvig (2010), explore African American college students' experiences with a White mentor at a Christian PWI. In Dahlvig's study, five African American students participated in in-depth interviews about cross-race mentoring, which provided intersectional and cultural context to their experiences. Dahlvig concluded that participants felt different from White and other minority peers. Participants felt different from White students and other minority groups on campus due to the different standards established for other minority groups, contributing to a sense of separation. Participants coped with alienation challenges by relying on faith and humor, connecting with African American subgroups, and giving back. African American and first-generation students experience many obstacles due to disadvantages. Often, they are the only African American or person of color in class, exacerbating fears and social exclusion. They may be the only person of color within their academic program, impeding any potential connections with others due to cultural and racial challenges. Amongst the many challenges faced, discrimination and alienation surface, creating hopelessness regarding being seen and heard. Despite challenges, students of color desire to connect with peers; however, race is a primary reason for disconnect and feeling a sense of separation. Participants coped with challenges of discrimination, alienation, and feeling different through their faith, humor, and connectedness to one another. Faith was crucial to their decision to attend college and persevere. Despite poor encounters, African American college students in Dahlvig's study believed prayer, trusting God, and spiritual motivation impacted their persistence through unfavorable situations. Connecting to other African Americans alleviated pressures and disconnectedness. In addition, African American students' connection to mentors mitigated feelings of isolation and internalizing negative experiences. Overall, when African American students feel connected to other affirming African American subgroups, they are more likely to persist, increasing retention.

Faculty advising is vital to racially and ethnically diverse first-generation students in graduate programs (Wofford et al., 2021). When advising is supportive, it provides a grounding for healthy development supporting first-generation minority students' role as competent scholars. In Wofford et al.'s (2021) mixed-methods study, first- and continuing-generation students participated in a 30- to 60-minute one-on-one in-person interview about expectations of faculty, the meaning ascribed to faculty's expectations, and students' perceptions of faculty advising influence on their academic development. The study concluded that first-generation students prefer more direct advising that teaches them educational and occupational skills (Wofford et al., 2021). First-generation and African American students worry about advisors not understanding their needs, heightening fears about expectations of advising relationships (Patton & Harper, 2003). Wofford et al. found that to ensure African American students thrive, faculty must develop a trusting relationship with first-generation and African American populations. Advising must address cultural aspects of assisting students in advancing academic development and growth. Faculty and student relationships may look different for each student, but establishing expectations is foundational to enhanced social capital. It is necessary, especially for first-generation minority STEM graduate students. First-generation minority graduate students expect advising to include academic support and understanding, guidance, and insight, about topics and processes they are unfamiliar with. Also, first-generation students prefer encouragement beyond assignments. While there are expectations to be independent thinkers in higher education, first-generation professional degree-seeking students benefit from institutional agents that help them generate thoughts and questions regarding rigorous work.

Historically Black Greek-letter organizations, known as sororities and fraternities, pride themselves on a collective purpose and play an integral role in the success of African Americans in higher education, working as a safe haven that affirms students' identities (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell,

2014). In a qualitative constructivist phenomenological study about first-and second- generation African American college students and intersectional support, Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014) found that students incorporate cultural and academic values through Greek- letter organizations while becoming united in a familial-like relationship, enhancing social capital support. Their research indicated that by joining sororities and fraternities, African American students identify ways to combat their circumstances through a collective effort, a culture of a high standard beyond academics, persistence, and social support.

African Americans heavily rely on their spirituality more than other racial groups (Taylor & Chatters, 2010). They have robust religious belief systems and spirituality that contribute to satisfaction with life's circumstances (Chatters et al., 2008). As Patton and McClure (2009) observed, when distressed in higher education, many African American students rely on their spirituality as an internal reaction to stressful situations, using their spirituality as coping strategies to overcome overwhelming circumstances and persevere. Similarly, Henfield et al. (2011) found African Americans often align themselves with supportive social systems or networks that promote wellness and contribute to purposeful actions. Within spiritual networks, African American students in higher education seek prayer, talk to church officials, and read their Bible, providing solace and comfort to persist and graduate. Minority college students receive support from their social network, encouraging them to persevere through barriers. Minority students are better connected to others and self through spirituality by positively conceptualizing support, mitigating disadvantageous outcomes for them. Through their spirituality and spiritual support network, they gain a greater understanding that they are not alone, contributing to their mental and spiritual health and academic success.

Skills provided through mentoring improve students' self-efficacy and academic and professional identity (Grimmett, 2010). When positive mentoring occurs between students and

points of contact at higher education institutions, students flourish, reporting heightened confidence, strengthened visibility and competitiveness, and feeling successful. Through empowering mentoring, advising, and nurturance, African American students, uphold their unique identity rejecting generalizations and prejudices about them that are damaging to their development (Grimmett, 2010). African Americans positively relate social support to religious support (Harvey et al., 2016). As described by Grimmett (2010), developmental programs like Brothers in Excellence equip African American students with spiritual principles by enhancing their spiritual-humanistic and cultural growth linked to developing natural abilities that foster purposeful living, healthy identity maturation, and individual needs assessment–all of which support the creation of social networks that promote African American students' academic development. Programs like Brothers in Excellence nurture students' development by validating their cultural identity and helping youth assess their individual needs. Healthy identity maturation in African American youth originates from spiritual-humanistic growth and cultural development, contributing to evolving youth. Spiritual development imparts three basic principles to African American students:

1. Uplifts and encourages them to feel valuable in all aspects of their life, including academia.
2. Assists them in developing natural abilities to motivate themselves.
3. Imparts principles about living purposefully through spiritual guidance and discipline.

Supportive developmental programs like Brothers in Excellence and Advancement Via Individual Determination, advocate for African American males (Grimmett, 2010). They support young men aspiring to increase sustainability in their academic and personal lives. Brothers in Excellence and Advancement Via Individual Determination uplift African American youth's ego, pride, sense of self, and self-esteem (Grimmett, 2010). African American students, specifically

students who attend high-poverty high schools, rarely receive mentoring that supports their cultural, academic, and career beliefs. Supportive developmental programs, such as Brothers in Excellence and Advancement Via Individual Determination, are essential for minority youth due to the programs' empowering nature that foster youth's intrinsic positive outcomes.

Close bonds with others within and outside of an academic program help minority and first-generation students create and define positive relationships, advising, and mentoring, which are critical to students' success. Defining positive relationships is important to underserved students because encouraging relationships serves as a roadmap for development (Felder, 2010). Felder's (2010) qualitative case study consisted of African American graduates with conferred doctoral degrees from a large private ivy league university. One-phase semi-structured interviews were completed to examine African American doctoral experiences and the impact of faculty mentoring. Historically, minority students have been perceived negatively, excluded, and misunderstood in academic settings, contributing to poor achievement. Uplifting and encouraging relationships allow space for institutional agents to affirm intersectionality, creating a sense of belonging for students in an environment that historically has attached negative perceptions to them. Overall, persistence is attributed to belonging and empowering social capital networks that empower first-generation and African American students to persevere despite disadvantages and obstacles. Compared to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), PWIs lack minority faculty and culture that aligns with students' values and promotes success for first-generation and African American students. First-generation and African American students enter college with disadvantages that could interfere with their academic development and achievement (Felder, 2010). When social capital networks are created, and core principles embedded within those networks are present, students thrive (Coleman, 1988). Felder concluded that although students can thrive in a setting with enhanced social capital that contributes to academic development, social

mobility, and enriched support, barriers such as poor connections with faculty and staff can impede access to progressive opportunities and enrichment opportunities for students of color. Thus, the alienation of first-generation African American students persists despite inclusive efforts.

African Americans in Higher Education

African American students have varying experiences in higher education. Minority students often feel isolated, discouraged, and treated unfairly. The following sections describe research regarding African Americans in post-secondary education. This section underlines empirical research regarding African American students' pleasant and unpleasant experiences and barriers that impacted students' development and success. It concludes with contributing factors to successful students pursuing higher education.

Research on African American Experiences in Higher Education

Through spirituality, African American students are better connected to others and themselves as they positively conceptualize support, mitigating disadvantageous outcomes for students of color (Henfield et al., 2011). In Henfield et al.'s (2011) qualitative phenomenology study, 11 African American doctoral students in a counselor education program at a PWI participated in semi-structured interviews about using various support systems and human agency to overcome barriers in their program. The participants reported they experienced barriers that impacted human agency and success. The challenging experiences they reported align with other studies of African American students struggling with feelings of isolation, disconnection, and unfortunate experiences with faculty (Henfield et al., 2013). Negative interactions are discouraging for students of color enrolled at PWIs. Faculty are often disrespectful, do not attend to their needs, and do not provide adequate direction for academic success (Henfield et al., 2011; Henfield et al., 2013). During classroom discussions, participants experience their peers discrediting their contributions, resulting in African American students feeling doubtful and experiencing negative

emotions. When peers discredit students of color, it makes them afraid they will affirm negative stereotypes about their culture (Seward, 2014). Consequently, students need to assert themselves while interacting with others to create a more pleasant, less damaging, and discrediting experience.

Henfield et al. (2011) also concluded that African American doctoral students were able to have their needs met through seeking collective support. They relied on more experienced African American students with similar interests and backgrounds. Race-based organizations outside their counselor education program helped them navigate higher education and relieved them of unwarranted interactions. Doctoral students of color at PWIs relied on collective support as a result of feeling misunderstood, not having their needs met, and needing more active experiences. In Henfield's (2013) study, other impediments to success for doctoral students of color included poor peer connections and faculty and staff lacking cultural understanding.

African American students experience critical incidents that significantly impact their academic development (Seward, 2019). Seward's (2019) concurrent mixed-methods study highlighted critical incidents contributing to students' experience in a counseling-related program. Thirty-two masters-level students of color participated in semi-structured interviews and a survey about resistance to multicultural training. The study concluded that students attribute their challenges to faculty lacking understanding of cultural issues and inexperience in teaching diverse students. Faculty and peers were uninformed of cultural concerns and made insensitive statements. Due to faculty's and peers' inexperience and unawareness of race- conscious and cultural approaches, damaging statements were not challenged, leaving students uncomfortable with classroom dynamics.

In Seward's (2014) grounded theory study, 20 masters-level students of color in a counseling program participated in two 30-to-60-minute interviews about their experience in a multicultural counseling course. Like other studies about minority students' experience in higher

education, Seward's study concluded that students of color were dissatisfied with higher education. Lack of fulfillment stemmed from the racial climate of their courses and program. Specifically, African American students felt strongly about faculty and staff moving beyond surface-level content about various cultures. Race matters are a focal point for African American students in higher education. Students of color experience dissatisfaction in programs due to coursework lacking depth and complexity in culture and race-related matters. Additionally, due to faculty and peers lacking understanding of culturally-awareness, students of color felt alienated, isolated, and misunderstood, which influenced their learning experiences altogether. Contributing to their learning experience is that students of color often shut down as a protective measure for self-perseveration and group perseveration due to a lack of trust in others within high education environment.

African American graduate students experience challenges during their educational career, including difficulties with inclusion, inadequate advising and mentorship, and enduring discomfort within their program (Haskins et al., 2013). Being the first in their family to pursue an advanced education, first-generation African American students feel overwhelmed, which contributes to attrition and insufficient progress. African American college students often receive reactive support at PWIs. Support is not readily provided, and interactions with others are insensitive to their needs. Inadequate support may cause students of color to feel left out, confirming fears and intensifying disconnections with others. In Haskins et al.'s (2013) phenomenology study, eight African American master's-level counseling students enrolled in PWIs participated in focus group interviews about their experiences in community, school, and family and marriage counseling programs. Overall, Haskins et al.'s study concluded that African American master's-level students experience similar challenges as undergraduate students of color. Master's-level students of color feel isolated and excluded and endure difficulties securing guidance outside predominately Black

groups. Minority students are disregarded and endure stereotype biases that confirm tokenization within predominately White settings. While this experience is not that of all students of color, many believe that due to others' unchecked biases about minority students, their needs are not addressed, leaving them disenchanted, seeking solace and refuge and refusing to unapologetically be their authentic selves.

Often, students feel uncomfortable addressing their needs with faculty and matriculate without connecting to influential faculty and staff who could help them enhance their social capital, leading to graduation and successful futures (Jack, 2019). Reflecting on personal experience as well as his sociological research, Jack (2019), reported that African American students often feel uncomfortable in educational settings due to feeling ostracized. Barriers that African American students endure are paralyzing to their academic development. Minority students endure barriers in higher education due to a university and program culture unaware of what is needed to guide these students toward successful futures. They navigate unfamiliar territory without primary support systems, including social capital networks. African American first-generation students report daunting interactions that impede interactions with non-minority classmates and faculty. African American students often lack adequate social capital networks when pursuing higher education. Should they fail to become members of a robust social network, African American find their academic progress at risk of stagnation, often resulting in students withdrawing from their program of study.

Research On Barriers for African American Students in Higher Education

African American students are more likely to have discouraging experiences at PWIs. These experiences become barriers for students and influence their development. In Robinson- Wood's (2009) mixed-methods study, 80 Black college students participated in research about an intersectional perspective on Black women's management of distress at PWIs. In this study, the

researcher found that African American students implemented coping strategies due to several barriers, including microaggressions. The research found that stress areas derive from academic pressure, inadequate resources, and race-related interactions-defined as microaggressions. These stressors quickly become barriers for African American students as obstacles persist and threaten their well-being of students. In Robinson-Wood et al.'s (2015) phenomenological study about microaggressions Black students endure, the researchers concluded that chronic, offensive and disturbing race-related experiences were taxing on students. Such disheartening experiences are due to exhausting encounters that diminish students' voices and intellect and do not challenge oppressive language and stereotype biases. Moreover, offensive race-related experiences created barriers that led to health conditions that impacted Black women graduate students' mental and physical health.

First-generation undergraduate students face more obstacles than their non-first-generation counterparts (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Barriers such as feeling excluded and enduring unfavorable interactions with faculty, staff, and non-minority students contribute to lower engagement and speechlessness during classroom discussions. In Stebleton and Soria's (2012) quantitative study, 145,150 first-generation students participated in the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey. The survey determines barriers that first-generation students face as they navigate college. Barriers for first-generation students are similar to those of African American students. The study concluded that first-generation students experience heightened obstacles to academic development including job and family responsibilities and feeling depressed and stressed (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Barriers also impact the health of first- generation students, creating increased stress and potentially resulting in lacking support needed for academic success (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014).

Factors Contributing to African American Students' Success Before Graduate Education

When support is cultivated and needs are nurtured, African American college students thrive, allowing optimal personal and academic success. In a grounded theory study on HBCUs, Williams et al. (2022) found that when first-generation African American college students' culture is affirmed within supportive structures, they are more likely to obtain academic achievement, including graduating from degree programs. Other factors contributing to students' success include faculty validating their experiences and roles outside the college. When holistic and communal support is provided, aligning with students' intersectional selves, they are more likely to be open to addressing their needs with institutional agents. Being open with faculty and staff regarding their needs contributes to decreased perceived obstacles that may impede success.

Chapter III

Methods

Research Design

This research used grounded theory to understand how first-generation African American graduate students use social capital to succeed. This study employed a grounded theory approach using methods and procedures from Corbin and Strauss (2015). The researcher interviewed participants, transcribed participants interviews, and coded them to identify concepts, categories, and themes attributing to their success. The researcher used constant comparative analysis to test interviews with and against existing findings that emerged from the data. As each interview's data was analyzed, the researcher used transcribed interviews, coding, and comparison procedures, highlighting the cyclical and repetitive nature of recursivity. The researcher used recursivity to generate a theoretical footing by repeatedly analyzing data, using the same process to test existing and emerging data. The researcher's role was pertinent in co-constructing data and maintaining an open and unbiased stance.

There is scant literature on social capital and first-generation African American graduate and professional degree students. This study interviewed current students, graduates, and students who withdrew from a master's or terminal professional degree program. A research study on first-generation African American graduate and professional degree students' use of social capital and influences through supportive factors will provide new knowledge about this population and the family therapy field. New knowledge will inform educators of the following:

4. Contributors of social capital for first-generation African American graduate and professional degree students;
5. Systemic relationships and enhanced social capital;
6. Degrees of support;

7. Interconnecting factors of social capital, support, and systemic interactions;

8. Determinants of success for first-generation African American professional degree students;

9. Impediments to success for first-generation African American graduate students; and

10. Systems that promote successful outcomes for first-generation African American graduate students.

Subjects

Purposive sampling methods ensure that participants were selected based on specific criteria (Dane, 2011). This study sample comprised of 17 purposefully selected first-generation African American/Black graduate students. Participants were currently enrolled, graduated, or had begun their graduate degree program and did not complete it or withdrew from it. Participants who did not complete their program of study and had no immediate plans to complete their degree were deemed non-successful/non-completer. Non-successful/non- completing students were included in the study's sample size when examining data against and with existing participant data. The researcher placed flyers in convenient places that students frequent and contacted school administrators to communicate research information to students, which contained a Qualtrics link to the selection criteria survey. After potential participants completed the selection criteria survey, the researcher selected individuals who met the ideal criteria: African American/Black, first-generation, and have been enrolled in graduate school or did not complete their graduate career. Third, the researcher contacted potential participants to schedule an interview. After each interview, the researcher asked participants for referrals for potential future participants, highlighting the snowball referral strategy. The researcher anticipated 24-45 participants, with 8-15 participants from each group: current, graduated, and non-completing/non-successful students.

Based on qualitative research, it is common to anticipate recruiting 15 or less participants for a research study. In this qualitative research, a small purposeful sample size was attributed to the rarity of the first-generation African American graduate student population, creating a roadblock with the gate of entry and resulting in 17 participants.

First-generation students are students whose mother or father did not attend higher education or obtain a professional graduate degree. African American students are those who self-identify with African American heritage, Black race, or have one or more biological parent(s) who self-identifies with African ancestry. A graduate degree refers to a professional degree program that offers master's degrees or higher. Also, it includes terminal degrees such as MD, JD, or Ph.D. This study used the terms graduate, terminal, and professional degrees interchangeably. This study did not differentiate success across disciplines or degrees. Focusing on success across disciplines does not align with this study's aim, which is to explain the experiences of first-generation African American graduate students, systems and factors that influence their development, and how to enhance their development and success. While doctoral and professional degree curricula offers more semester credit hours, advanced coursework within a specific subject and field, and requires a rigorous academic workload; the measure of success aligned with students graduating rather than the quantity or rigor of educational material offered in an academic program. The extent of success is a topic for future researchers to explore.

Recruitment

The researcher recruited by advertising through flyers, email, social media, personal referrals, and purposive sampling method. The researcher placed flyers in coffee shops, libraries, and locations where graduate students were likely to spend their time engaging in extracurricular activities. Institutional agents and organizations received emails stating the scope of the research. The researcher asked school officials and organizations to forward the study's details to students.

The researcher informed community leaders, students, and graduates of the research study through social media by posting a flyer online that directed individuals to a Qualtrics link. The secure link provided participants with additional information about the study. After the potential participant contacted the researcher, the researcher notified them of the study's parameters and duration. Afterward, the researcher scheduled a 60-minute semi-structured interview with the participant at a convenient place and time or via a secure audio and video conferencing program. Before the interview, participants received information regarding the study's voluntary nature and their right to withdraw without negative consequences.

After interviewing current students and graduates, the researcher obtained referrals to former students of those programs who did not complete their program of study. The researcher placed flyers in common as well as unorthodox areas that students may frequent, such as local grocery stores, faith-based organizations, and public venues. Potential participants received a Qualtrics link through email and social media that informed the student of criteria for selection for the study. After identifying potential participants, an in-person interview occurred with an audio recorder or a confidential and secure web-based audio and video program for individuals not residing in Texas. Up to 15 participants were intended to compose each group: current students, graduates, and non-completers/non-successful.

During the interviews, themes emerged through an iterative process. Interviews focused on contributors of social capital. After each interview, the researcher categorized the data into themes. Concluding each interview, the researcher asked participants to identify other colleagues for the study. The purposive sampling process ensured that referrals were intentionally selected based on specific criteria. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method directed toward a particular population (Dane, 2011). The population may be difficult to access, but well informed on the nature of the study. Snowball referring is a strategy used when working with populations that are

challenging to locate. Initial participants were an important resource for locating potential participants that may be difficult to identify without assistance. Snowball referral strategies identify individuals of a specific group that may not otherwise have been reachable to the researcher (Dane, 2011). Purposive sampling method with snowball referring permitted the researcher access to individuals who were difficult to access without many barriers, developed some trust between the researcher and subject, and it ensured that this study was generalizable. See Table One for sample demographic information.

Data Collection Strategy

Subjects participated in semi-structured 60-minute interviews. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded. Sample questions were from an integrated social capital questionnaire from Narayan et al. (2004). See Appendix.

The researcher held interviews in a quiet, confidential space. Names and identifying information were redacted from notes and transcripts to secure participant confidentiality. Interviews of participants were assigned a numerical value. There was no other connection to the participant and data. During each interview, faculty and staff were referenced by job titles when discussed as a part of the participant's journey. If a discussion of more than one person of a specific job title occurred, a numerical value was assigned. The researcher did not store records of identifying information. After each interview, the researcher transported interviews in a locked encasement. After interviews were transported to the researcher's office, the researcher transcribed the data in a secluded, confidential, and enclosed office space at her home. Then, analysis began using a qualitative data analysis method that supported the coding and organization of the data.

Data Analysis and Verification

In grounded theory, verification is intertwined with the processes of data collection, coding, and analysis, so that the methods used to process data also support the trustworthiness of data (see

Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 43). Organizing data was important in confirming the integrity of research. Organizing data helped with all stages of data analysis, including transcription, coding, and analysis during theory development. The transcription process was a part of the discovery of meaningful data. Transcription began after each interview. After each interview and transcription, interviews were coded and compared with and against one another. Emerging data from each interview was analyzed through a constant comparison process. Constant comparison compares emerging data from participants' interviews with and against existing findings during open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This process involved recursion, or repeatedly analyzing data, to discover new data and develop a theory.

Open Coding

Open coding was the initial stage of comparative analysis. This coding method utilized comparative analysis to compare each interview to others, identify patterns, and construct a conceptual possibility. It formulated a conceptual idea of what participants discussed in their interviews. Segmenting data into meaningful words led to creating codes and concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Concepts were the beginning of theory construction in the analysis process. After transcription, the researcher analyzed the data, line by line, segmenting the data into meaningful words and phrases that participants used. The words and phrases were written in the margins of the text as they were identified, creating codes and concepts.

Axial Coding

Axial coding was pertinent in linking data together and identifying more meaning through the data. Axial coding generated categories by comparing variations, differences, and "detailed information that built upon a theory, making it relevant" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 34). During the theory construction process, categories held data together and continually built upon meaning.

After codes were generated, the researcher compared codes and concepts from each interview with and against previous interviews, generating categories.

Selective Coding

Selective coding was a higher-level advanced coding that solidified categories. Selective coding contributed to the theoretical framework created by refining data and ensuring data saturation. Selective coding consisted of integrating previously generated categories and subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Selective coding methods were also used to identify meaningful moments for the researcher through memos that contributed to the analytic process of the research. After axial coding, subcategories were identified using reflexivity. Meaningful moments for the research were identified through memos contributing to the solidification of categories, contributing to a theoretical understanding about influences of social capital on first-generation African American graduate students and their success.

Chapter IV

Findings

This study's sample consisted of 17 purposefully selected first-generation African American graduate students (see Table One). The study sample comprised of eight currently enrolled participants, six previously enrolled and graduated participants, and three who did not complete their graduate program. Of the three participants who did not complete their graduate program, one had hopes to re-enroll in the future at an indefinite date, and two withdrew from their program. Of the eight participants currently enrolled in an academic program, three were enrolled in a master's program, and five were enrolled in a doctoral program. Of the six participants previously registered, two graduated from a master's program, and four graduated from a doctoral program. Of those who did not complete their graduate degree, two participants withdrew from a doctoral program and one from a master's program. Participants who satisfied their degree requirements and graduated from their degree program represent successful students.

Table I

Sample Demographics of First-Generation African American Graduate Students

	Currently Enrolled	Graduate	Previously Enrolled	Total
Purposeful Sample	8	6	3	17
Gender				
Male	1			
Female	7	6	3	17
Age				
<40	8	4	2	14
>41		2	1	3

	Currently Enrolled	Graduate	Previously Enrolled	Total
Program				
MA	3	4	1	8
Ph.D.	5	2	2	9
Type of Institution				
PWI				15
HBCU/Minority Serving				2

Participants currently enrolled in a graduate program with no wish to withdraw represent successful students. Participants who withdrew from their degree program planned to exit it before ultimately retiring from their higher education pursuit. Participants who did not complete their professional degree program and eventually departed it were represented as non-completers. The initial anticipated sample size was 24-45 participants, with 8-15 participants from each group: current, graduated, and non-completing students. However, due to the nature and sensitivity of the topic and the study, the researcher had access to very few members of this small sample group. After accounting for time and schedules, there were 17 participant interviews. Eight were enrolled, six graduated, and three were non-completing participants in their terminal degree program.

Participants in this study pursued their academic degrees from universities in Texas, Georgia, or Arkansas. The participants were enrolled in, had graduated from, or did not complete graduate academic programs in fields of study including counseling, education, marital and family therapy, physical therapy, and school psychology. Seven participants studied in a counseling program, five in an education program, two in a marital and family therapy program, one in a physical therapy program, one in a school psychology program, and one declined to reveal specific details regarding her program of study. However, the participant confirmed details regarding her classmates, professors, and information regarding the program curriculum. Eighty-eight percent of

participants attended PWIs. Some universities were nonsectarian, and others prided themselves on their religious grounding.

In total, 17 students participated in interviews regarding their graduate experience and first-generation status. As mentioned in Chapter III, 60-minute, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews occurred in a quiet and confidential space. After each interview, the researcher utilized bracketing by writing memos regarding topics the participants discussed, initial reactions, insights regarding assumptions, and biases. Then, the researcher transcribed each interview and began open coding. Open coding included analyzing transcribed data line by line and identifying emerging phrases and concepts aligned with social capital support. Concepts were identified and documented in the margins of the transcript. Analysis of codes occurred after concepts emerged by highlighting words or codes aligned with social capital support. Axial coding analysis occurred after open coding by comparing data, identifying themes, and categorizing them. Initially, several themes emerged. Those themes were categorized and grouped together based on commonalities. After emerging categories were identified, refinement of the data began as subcategories were formed based on similar findings and connections within the data. After the second participant completed their interview, memos were written, and the interview was transcribed and compared to the previous interview. Constant comparison analysis occurred using open, axial, and selective coding to identify concepts, codes, categories, and subcategories while comparing the analyzed interview with and against previous interviews, using a cyclical repetition method or recursivity to corroborate relationships between findings. Bracketing was necessary during analysis as memoing assumptions and biases were identified and tested the integrity of the data. Findings from participant interviews were examined in subsequent semi-structured interviews to support the data and formulate sound findings.

In this study, the terms graduate and professional degree are used interchangeably and describe an education beyond a bachelor's degree, including master's and doctoral degrees. A demographic survey administered in the initial stages of this research study guided the determination of first-generational student status. The demographic survey identified specific criteria of participants' parents' educational level. Criteria for participation in this research included participants who had parents that did not obtain a graduate or professional degree.

Overview of Findings

Two salient themes emerged from the data: students receiving support in academia and students receiving support outside of academia, including spiritual-humanistic support. In academia, participants felt the most supported when faculty and staff attended to their concerns, created safe spaces within the classroom, and fostered comfortable, affirming, and inclusive interactions. In addition, participants felt supported by professors when expectations were communicated to them, personalized direction was provided, stressors were acknowledged, and when assistance provided helped students overcome roadblocks.

Seeking guidance outside of academia was a prominent theme. Participants sought direction outside of academia, including relying on spiritual values through spiritual networks and utilizing coping mechanisms as a self-care method. These two themes surfaced when participants accepted spiritual resources (i.e., Bible, devotionals, prayer, etc.) and used them to cope with stressors within and outside their program. Participants created supportive external networks. However, forging these networks was a consequence of barriers. This study is the first to investigate first-generation African American graduate students' experiences and how systemic social support influences success. The following are reports of contributing factors to first-generation African American graduate students' quest for success.

Support in Academia

The following headings detail the findings of this study, including two salient themes. This study's salient themes include support in and outside of academia. Support within academia delineates first-generation African American graduate students and their connection to others, how they created close friendships, nurtured brother-and-sisterhoods through intimate connections, and the uplifting emotional support students received that encouraged their development and success. This section concludes with the impact of overwhelming stressors and how bonding with others encouraged first-generation African American graduate students to persist.

Connection to Other Students

Positive impact and change expert Susan C. Young once said, "Connecting with others gives us a sense of inclusion, connection, interaction, safety, and community. Your vibe attracts your tribe" (Goodreads, n.d.). The participants in this study agreed that when surrounded by like-minded people with similar goals, they could create close friendships and bonds that would contribute to their success. Below are subthemes and contributing factors that emerged from the data and contributed to first-generation African American graduate students' success when connecting to other students.

Participants developed relationships and connected with other students that had similar cultural interests. They characterized others with similar interests as individuals who had physical traits and similar cultural worldviews to theirs. Participants were fascinated to find peers that looked like and understood them. Participants believed that these peers would be more understanding and accepting of them, facilitating a more profound bond through study groups and extending their relationship outside of academia. Therefore, they began to create relationships with peers of similar ages, similar cultural backgrounds, and complementary academic values and

learning styles. Participant 8, a currently enrolled doctoral student, shared about beginning to trust and connect to peers who they believed shared cultural insights and values:

> “Now, I have created a study group within the program. It took me a semester to find people because I'm the only African American female. I'm very open to like other races, but it's not the first thing I do. It's somebody that doesn't look like me. Or that doesn't act like me. If I make a joke, or if I try to refer to something, you're not going to understand me.”

Participants initially felt more comfortable with peers they assumed had similar cultural values, cultural awareness, and personal understanding of their worldview. They recounted openly speaking with peers, engaging in extra-curricular activities outside of school, and sharing similar values and first-hand experiences through academic-related activities, such as creating study groups.

Participants described anticipatory trust and assessing future friendships with peers who looked like them. Participants initially exchanged introductions and pleasantries with others during this trust-building process to expand their network. If the participant considered the peer beneficial to their network, they began a relationship by exchanging contact information. A bond was established by exchanging contact information. Participants' connections with peers are evident in Participant 2, a master's degree graduate, who told of a "school brother" that she connected with and often relied on:

> "My school brother, we were in dyadic supervision and pretty much everything together. That was helpful as well. Just a combination of things, but particularly people in [a] position to be there when I needed them [was helpful]."

An amiable connection formed when participants were confident that a relationship with their peers would benefit their success. Students in this study reported having familial peer

relationships that they relied on and described as a "wolf pack," "school brother," "community," or "cohort(ee)." Familial relationships helped participants feel encouraged when considering giving up or withdrawing from their program. It is evident in Participant 8's analysis of examining peer actions, trusting their judgment, and believing that successful networks would ensue.

> "We all just kind of happened [to] live in the same area. I felt a bit more comfortable because I knew these people a little more than the rest of the group. I had seen how they acted outside [of the program]. How I thought they might act while they studied. That kind of drew me in. Like, okay, well, let's all study together. From there, we just kind of started setting up more study dates. Now, we have like a GroupMe, a text, a group text. We're just kind of like a wolf pack."

Participants in this study recalled their strong bond with peers. They compared the strength of their connection as similar to a wolf pack, family environment, and as brothers and sisters, identical to extended family or fictive kin (Martin & Martin, 1978). After participants analyzed cohort members' potential contributions to their overall success, they felt more comfortable cultivating relationships that became a part of their social network. *Fictive kin* refers to individuals within interdependent relationships that foster mutual aid– emotional, mental, spiritual, and financial– within the group (Martin & Martin, 1978). They provide collaborative, collective emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and economic aid within a network. Shared experiences characterize communal support. When subjects in this study were a part of a collaborative, supportive network of peers, they felt an intense sense of comfort. The reassurance that subjects had with peers with similar interests and cultural backgrounds contributed to their resiliency in their graduate program and social network. Peer relationships evolved outside the academic environment, attended to personal and educational needs, and provided emotional support. Bonding with other students made it easier to bear obstacles.

An example of participants connecting to cohort members that looked like them, befriending others, and enriching their network is evident in Participant 9, a doctoral graduate, who reflected on feeling secure about seeing other minority students, which helped to focus on successful outcomes, as evident below:

> "[I connected with] one of the young ladies just because she was the only other Black person in our program. So, most Black people automatically have that immediate connection, just the "hey, there's another Black person in here." I think that's kind of what started our dialogue and our friendship, and then it just built over time based on that."

Creating Close Friendships

An example of participants cultivating friendships that provided helpful resources, such as advice and tips, is evident in Participant 8's response to seeking assistance and having helpful aides:

> "I think the Big that I had created more like that family environment because I got to meet her friends that were above me. We hung out outside of class. She gave me tips and advice. I think that definitely cultivated."

Participant 8's recollection of a Big, similar to a mentor, corroborates with other first-generation African American graduate students. Like many other first-generation African American graduate students, Participant 8 recalled how her academic program provided her with a Big, a peer mentor, who created more of a family environment. The mentor provided advice and tips about succeeding in the program, which cultivated beyond that of a peer mentorship when the Big introduced and invited Participant 8 to her social network. Participant 10, a currently enrolled master's degree-seeking student, described peer cohort support, emphasizing emotional bonds and close friendships within peer network that nurtured emotional support:

> “We're [peers] supportive of each other emotionally as well. We talk about our concerns and our family. We've been through marriages and illnesses. When one doesn't hear from the other for a moment, we call and check on each other. We encourage each other if one's in a slump or just discouraged with how the program is going. We share information, go to lunch, and have breakfast together. We just, we take care of one another.”

Participant 10 described the "wolf pack" that Participant 8 summarized. A peer relationship led to a close friendship, which cultivated a peer network or a "wolf pack." Like Participants 8 and 10, nurturing support encouraged other first-generation African American graduate students. Participants' reports of "people being in a position to be there for them when they needed them" endorsed the power of supportive networks.

Providing Emotional Support

Participants reported their emotional connection and bonds created with other students. Their emotional connection with other cohort members led to supporting one another. Participant 6, a master's degree graduate, discussed the importance of networks of similar cultural understanding, called a "support unit" of African American women in the program:

> “We were very supportive of one another and very kind. We would even have lunch dates. We would do other things outside of the program. So, we came together as a support unit as African American women in this program.”

Similarly, Participant 10 discussed how chatting about personal concerns, sharing information, and encouraging one another facilitated emotional support:

> “We're [peers] supportive of each other emotionally as well. We talk about our concerns and our family. We've been through marriages and illnesses. When one doesn't hear from the other for a moment, we call and check on each other. We

> encourage each other if one's in a slump or just discouraged with how the program is going. We share information, go to lunch, and have breakfast together. We take care of one another."

Bonding Through Overwhelming Stressors

Participants in this study described responsibilities at school that left them feeling overwhelmed with little time to participate in activities outside their academic program. Participants discussed the rigors of academic work, not having enough resources, and feeling alone and uncomfortable. They directed their attention toward "people in a position to be there when they needed them." Due to students' lack of social life outside of academia, they could not enhance their social capital unless initiated through their program. A currently enrolled doctoral degree-seeking participant, Participant 12 described being overwhelmed with managing work/life balance, and coursework, as evident in this statement: "It was class at night, working all day, class at night, and just really stressed out."

Students' lack of social activity outside of the classroom eventually led to seeking cohort members as a supportive buffer, which resulted in a social cohort network as described here:

> "For the doctoral level, I'm part of a cohort. So, I think a lot of my support has come from being within a cohort and us basically bonding, sharing, talking, discussing, and just being friends and supporting one another. I think the cohort style has been a benefit to this program." (Participant 12)

Connection to Faculty and Administrative Staff

During their graduate education, first-generation African American students connected with faculty and administrative staff. Students connected with staff when faculty supported students by understanding their individualistic needs and directing them to helpful resources. Through practical guidance, students felt supported in their academic pursuits. The following section, connection to

faculty and administrative staff, delineates first-generation African American graduate students establishing positive expectations through organic interactions with faculty that uplifted them, processing struggles, and overcoming stressors with empathic faculty and administrative staff.

Establishing Positive Expectations

Participants described organic interactions as moments that occurred without force, naturally, and resulted in positive thoughts. Organic interactions established expectations as evident in Participant 7, a currently enrolled master's degree-seeking student, recollecting feeling empowered and having faith in self:

> "My great experience was my first semester there. One of the first professors I met treated us not just like students; he referred to us as scholars and his future colleagues. I think just phrasing things that way and treating people that way will empower them, and that's how I started the program. Well, I mean if this person has faith that I'll do it well, then I'll probably do well."

Participant 7's response corroborated other first-generation African American graduate students' responses. Faith and feeling empowered resonated with other participants, who also described initial interactions with encouraging faculty and staff as open, not restrictive, optimistic, and creating a greater expectation for the future. When staff helped students feel at ease by respecting the student as a colleague and contributor to their field of practice, the student felt empowered.

Participants described having a positive outlook due to empowering words that led to positive expectations. Participant 12's description of the impact of professors who discussed their personal academic experiences provided encouraging words and discussed expectations of them, as evident below:

> “One of our professors from the Intro class... She just had a huge impact on us. She gave us these rocks one night with encouraging words to keep and put on our work desks so that whenever we felt we needed encouragement, we could look at the rocks. She shared her experiences with us. She encouraged us basically to be doctoral students. She told us how we would be expected to speak when we talked about research and when we discussed research with other colleagues and some of the things that we should say.”

An example of participants receiving personalized direction is evident in Participant 16, a currently enrolled doctoral student, in a remembrance of initial interactions with academic staff and the importance of cultivating connections and receiving guidance from faculty to helpful resources, which contributed to a successful attitude:

> “She [the program director] provided support, I say personally, but on a professional level. From her position as program director, [she] directed me to the appropriate people on campus to get me enrolled, admitted, and connected with financial resources and other colleagues, students to serve as mentors to me in the program.”

First-generation African American graduate students who received personalized direction from faculty, like Participants 16 and 12, believed that guidance was beneficial. Participants described being more aware of resources that helped them thrive in higher education. While professors helped guide and direct potential students to academic resources, they also informed students of financial resources. Additionally, helpful professors recommended peers to utilize as mentors, which contributed to developing networks of emotional support and tangible resources. An example of program staff guiding participants in instrumental ways is in Participant 10's account of a staff member who was the "guru of assisting":

> “Well, actually, there's a young man that went through the program himself, and he works in the counseling center. And he does the orientation and guides us, and gives us information. He was a great resource because he had gone through the program himself. So, he was instrumental in helping you avoid the pitfalls, helping you know what to do. He was the guru for assisting us.”

During their interviews, participants reported how they addressed individual concerns. Addressing their individual concerns was helpful to their development and establishing stronger connections with faculty and staff. Other first-generation African American graduate students, like Participant 10, described challenges that arose and staff addressing challenges and grounding the student in self-compassion:

> “Although he is a White male and older, he seemed to understand the challenges and the bias out there towards all cultures. So, sometimes when, maybe if I got a little discouraged about a grade or want to excel or compare myself to other cultures or students, he would always ground me, if that makes sense, put it into perspective.”

Participants believed that academic staff were most helpful when they were understanding, open, and non-judgmental. Listening and asking open-ended questions were important as faculty and staff modeled sensitivity, "allowing everyone a chance to give their input." Participants' interviews confirmed open and welcoming "spaces" that led to personal conversations about concerns. An example of organic open and non-judgmental interactions is evident in a currently enrolled doctoral student, Participant 11 described staff addressing academic and personal concerns and directing participants toward helpful resources:

> “I think they [professors] have done a really sincere job at making a space of openness. I think it's a very welcoming type of environment. It's not judgmental. I've seen my cohorts, people from pretty much different backgrounds, ages, races, and

> sexuality. I think they do that. I think that they model listening and asking very good open-end type questions that allow everybody to have a chance to kind of get their input."

Processing Struggles with Empathetic Staff

Participants started their graduate academic journey with positive expectations but faced challenges that influenced their projected academic outcomes. Participants who experienced problems described struggles that affected their academic development. When faced with difficult situations, students regularly felt connected with others by sharing their struggles with staff and peers, who uplifted, guided, and supported them in caring for their personal needs.

Participants connected to others around them for support during demanding situations. Participant 10, a master's student in a counseling program at a religious university, was in distress due to family health concerns that affected her grades. Participant 10's description of processing struggles with empathetic staff is evident below:

> "My mother developed pancreatic cancer, and I had to take care of her and attend class. He [Professor] understood, he was there, and encouraged and, you know, talked about different things. So, at that point, I guess I received a B and was not happy. He put it in perspective [by saying] you're taking care of your mom and, you know, you're still managing to attend school."

The above excerpt illuminates the personal struggles of first-generation African American students in graduate school and the effects on students' academic satisfaction. Participant 10's excerpt highlights the role of faculty and administrative staff as they understand, encourage, and provide insight into participants' concerns. When advising becomes personal for a first- generation African American graduate student, a connection with faculty contributes to the student's well-being and academic outcome as faculty helps shift the student's perspective.

Support Outside of Academia

While previous sections focused on support within academia from students, faculty, and administrative staff, first-generation African American graduate students did not always believe that their voices mattered. Participants sought external support through spiritual values and mental health coping tools that aided their development and success. Below highlights the importance of promoting systemic support for first-generation African American graduate students as it is essential to their success.

Relying on Spiritual Values

Two subthemes highlighted the importance of having social networks that accepted spiritual resources and participants utilizing coping mechanisms, such as prayer, that helped them overcome barriers and achieve success. Making meaning through spiritual connections, prayer, and support with peers within academic programs was important for the first-generation African American students in this study. Manifesting spiritual connections and accepting spiritual resources helped participants to feel optimistic about their academic pursuits and needs. In addition, receiving spiritual resources through groups of individuals outside of their program helped participants cope with hardships within their graduate learning experience. Spiritual resources included prayer at a counseling center where participants communed when in distress and shared devotionals.

The importance of spiritual resources resonated with all participants in this study. Every participant, whether from HBCU or PWI institutions, highlighted the importance of their spirituality and the support network from which they received spiritual resources. This is particularly notable because the researcher did not specifically recruit religious participants. Purposive snowball sampling was used in this study, and religion was not among the inclusion criteria in selecting participants. Instead, the researcher initially recruited current students and graduates by placing flyers on university campuses in Texas and in public locations that students

frequent in their leisure time, describing the study's intent. As an example of how spiritual resources aided them in coping and focusing on academic work, Participant 12, a doctoral student studying educational leadership, described receiving daily devotionals from a network of cohort members.

> "I always take time for a devotional, and of course, I pray, which was a part of my practice before doctoral studies that I've added to my daily devotional. I got the [devotional] book from a member of my cohorts. Like I said, we were a group …and she sent a screenshot of the devotional, so I added that to my routine to help me focus."

First-generation African American graduate participants described daily spiritual resources, especially prayer and devotionals, as critical in feeling supported by others and comforted by spiritual resources, which shifted their views about their circumstances. Participants discussed how spiritual resources fostered a greater sense of self and well-being, which strengthened students' social capital support. Students believed that close-knit networks provided mutual support and enabled them to overcome personal and academic obstacles and find ways to cope with barriers. Having a keen sense of spirituality led to feelings of positivity and comfort, which is evident in Participant 1, a doctoral degree graduate, who said:

> "When I feel like that...alone...negative feelings came along I could always pull from my spirituality. I could always pray. I could find the support and comfort I didn't get there [school] in my church and other places. So, it helped me to keep going. So, God has been the crux of this journey. "

Participants discussed ongoing relationships with peers. During distressful times, participants and cohort members enhanced their connection by praying with and for one another and creating safe spaces to cope. Participant 15, a currently enrolled master's student in a marriage

and family therapy program, demonstrated ongoing bonding events in unique spaces in the excerpt below. Participant 15's recollection of gathering, praying, and finding strength and solace in unique environments is an example of the usefulness of using spiritual networks and resources while in graduate programs:

> "That's it, [I cope through] God. God is my source. I mean, I'll go to Him for everything that I need. That's where I find my strength, and I have several colleagues here that are very spiritual. So, we collect in this room right here. If we're having a bad day or one of us having a bad day, we'll come in here and find solace sitting in this room [counseling center room]."

The above excerpts are examples of participants describing the importance of creating spiritual networks as they promote spiritual-humanistic development, positive well-being, and guide successful outcomes.

Using Coping Mechanisms

In this study, first-generation African American graduate students recalled distress when support was vital to their well-being. During distressful times, participants utilized resources from family and friends for support, including coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms were described as actions, beliefs, thoughts, and resources that reduced stress. Support outside of academic settings included coping mechanisms, resources, and spiritual networks of family and friends. The importance of supportive spiritual networks was profound for the study's population and is evident in Participant 2's comments about using prayer circles with a friend and utilizing robust, spiritually rich literature to "calm the soul":

> "Trying to form prayer circles and connecting with my friend- because we learned that we had to lean on each other at the end [contributed to success]. Also, my spiritual life grew exponentially because anything I could read to calm my soul. I

really started to do some self-work. So, all that kind of fed into my success as well. That really defining who I am piece."

Like Participants 2 and 3, other first generation-African American graduate students recounted friends and family having a critical role in their well-being and utilizing coping strategies to overcome stressors. Participant 3, a master's degree graduate, told about not wanting to burden family with doubt but instead venting to friends as a coping mechanism:

> "I shared what my days looked like, but I wouldn't share the sense of doubt of being overwhelmed and those sort of things...my core family knew what my days looked like, and they were, you know, praying for me. So, I did vent to friends... just being able to vent. Being able to vent was one of the ways that I actually did cope."

Barriers Hindering Success

This section, barriers hindering success, summarizes salient findings regarding the disadvantageous experiences of first-generation African American students. While some unpleasant encounters are due to the risks of being a first-generation and African American student, roadblocks in this section highlight the interpersonal experiences of first-generation African American graduate students in this study. Below is a summary of barriers: students feeling uncomfortable, not trusting faculty, feeling emotionally unsafe and vulnerable, and feeling intimidated due to fear and uncertainty. The section concludes with unchallenged indignities and oppressive comments that created division and disconnection, which led to students seeking external support or withdrawing from their program of study.

Feeling Uncomfortable

Verbal crudeness from other students contributed to participants feeling uncomfortable in academic spaces. Verbally hostile environments and discriminatory peers exacerbated apprehensive feelings and contributed to participants feeling alone and ostracized. Encountering

crude behavior that contributed to participants lacking social capital is evident in Participant 2's excerpt about enduring distressing interactions with unsupportive cohort members as their prejudices created distrust:

> “There were some students who said that they want to work in more suburban areas because they know that we won't come there... they're [peers in social and cultural class] just like "yeah I don't really want to be around Black people." You're saying this in a class of people who are Black.”

Feelings of Distrust

Trust is paramount in first-generation African American students' success. When participants experienced a lack of trust, they felt inhibited in establishing networks that could enhance social capital. An example of participants' distrust and its influence on social capital networks is evident in Participant 7's account of not trusting a program director:

> “[The reason I don't feel comfortable is that] I've experienced with the program, in particular, a lack of support from the faculty, like from the program, in particular, a lack of support from faculty, like from the program director specifically... Because I've said some things to people and the people that I didn't tell knew, you know? ... there's been professors that have come up to me talking to me about things that I didn't invite them to talk to me about, you know? So, that's where some of the distrust has come from...it seems like my information and all my plans are just spread through the whole program.”

Feeling Emotionally Unsafe

Participants believed they were susceptible to maltreatment due to others' attitudes. Verbal crudeness and distrust led to participants feeling emotionally unsafe. Feeling emotionally unsafe impeded participants' development as they felt targeted due to their heritage and assumed

socioeconomic status. Participant 5, an unsuccessful doctoral student, commented on a professor who diminished their ability to feel safe:

> "She was like the chair. She was not the director of the program, but she was always operating as a director. I feel like she was racist. Then she was not just racist, but she really kind of kissed up to the people who had money [that was not African American]. "

Feeling Intimidated

Enduring differential treatment challenged participants' sense of belonging. Successful and unsuccessful participants in this study reported feeling intimidated due to unpleasant interactions. Unpleasant interactions delayed establishing networks and progress toward degree completion and impaired participants' mental health. These interactions included differential treatment and faculty and staff not challenging racially charged and biased language. Below is an account of professor's being "intimidating, mean, and uncompassionate":

> "At [University], I didn't click with their professors. Some of them I didn't like because they were rude. [They had] no compassion. When it came down to compassion, they were just teachers like professors. You know how sometimes professors are supposed to be intimidating, but they were mean for no reason. Just extra for no reason. I wasn't used to it." (Participant 4).

While fear is a normal emotion when encountering uncertainty, participants in this study felt intimated by unpleasant interactions with professors. Unsuccessful participants, like Participant 5, discussed how scrutinous looks from professors confirmed their ideas about how others perceived their culture and place within a program:

> "She, [my supervisor], was not very supportive [to me] as she was with some people. Do you know how somebody looks at you and already has an opinion of

you? I feel like that is how she was. I could have been one of the people she did not pick. I thought she was a little racist. I did not talk the way she wanted me to talk. I was not well spoken like the other Black girl who spoke in a different manner. I just had – I was a girl from the hood."

Above, Participant 5 spoke of interactions with a supervisor she often interacted with in her department. Like this participant, first-generation African American graduates thought that scrutinous looks and expressions were acts of intimidation directed at them. The above statement confirmed lacking connections that would eventually lead to feeling unsuccessful and withdrawing from their degree program.

Unchallenged Indignities

We all know the phrase, "sticks and stones may make break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Participants in this study recounted words that cut like a knife as peers spoke degrading and oppressive words about participants' culture as first-generation African American graduate students. Degrading comments were damaging to participants' development and impaired their mental health. Participant 2's statement indicates the power of indignities as demeaning comments were not challenged in the classroom and impacted first-generation African American participants: "I didn't feel safe. I didn't feel safe sharing myself with my peers... peer saying that's why I'm working over here because I don't really want to be around Black people."

Unsupportive cohort members' comments were oppressive, creating division and disconnection. Students like Participant 2 felt unsafe as they heard oppressive words. Feeling unsafe was an antecedent to participants seeking spiritual guidance and enhancing spiritual networks to cope, as professors did not challenge peer comments that participants felt were unsupportive and degrading.

As mentioned above, participants recalled incidents where they believed differential treatment impaired their ability to create social networks that would have aided their success. Below is an example of differential treatment that hurt Participant 8, resulting in the student seeking supportive network options outside their program:

> “I feel like there are people that when they talk... people are more reluctant when I say something. "Like, I don't really know if that's true. Or, are you sure you know what you're talking about?" Yeah. I know. I don't think you really know versus if somebody else says it. I feel like they'll listen more. Or they might believe it more. That happened to me during small group discussions and class meetings. I don't know if it has anything to do with my race. Or if it has to do with how I carry myself, like being confident. At the same time, it kind of hurts because now you all aren't taking me seriously whenever I say something, for the most part. At least that's how I see it in my eyes.”

According to the Merriam-Webster (2020) dictionary, stereotype means an oversimplification of opinions commonly held by groups of people who demonstrate prejudiced attitudes and judgment. Participants in this study were intimidated by unchallenged indignities, interactions, and stereotype biases. Students recalled when peers commented on their status as first-generation African American students, which appeared critical and biased, eventually leaving students feeling "disenchanted." Below are examples of stereotype biases that later weakened participants' connection to others who did not understand their culture:

> “Yeah. I think that people had more expectations about me being an African American in a graduate program than I did. It's kind of like, Oh, you're a graduate student? I'm like yeah. Oh, how is that? What do you mean, how is that?” (Participant 6).

In the above excerpt, students like Participant 6 recalled times when their competence, position, and culture were judged based on the color of their skin and their first-generation status. These actions by cohort members left participants concluding that they were a part of a minority group status without agency or an individual voice. Below is an example of Participant 9 recalling times when challenging events occurred that left the student feeling hypervigilant:

> "I think that in that particular scenario, it's often the same for most Black people where you're the only Black person or one of a few. I always wanted to be very cognizant of things that I said and did because, in my personal opinion, I feel like we, as Black people, don't get to be individuals. We represent a group, and so that was challenging for me because even though I felt like I had a voice, I don't know that it would have always been associated as this is [my] personal opinion or this is [me] exhibiting her voice versus--the other Black girl, her name was [T, which is similar to the participant]."

Participants often believed that others judged their unique experiences as "the voice" or "the experience" of first-generation African Americans. This idea derived from students' encounters with peers who frequently judged them based on the color of their skin, ascribed ideas, and assigned specific attitudes toward this population. Below, Participant 17, an unsuccessful doctoral student who withdrew from a degree program, recalled off-putting encounters with stereotype biases:

> "Sometimes when there were things we were doing research and it had to do with different people's background and [if] it was something about African American anything it was like I was the spokesperson for that. You know, I can't speak for all Black people in the world, but I can speak for my experiences. But it was kind of off-putting sometimes because of that for me."

Overall, participants in this study endured circumstances that impeded their success. Although participants highlighted barriers and their impact, they found support in their social capital networks. Three participants allowed barriers to halt their academic journey and withdrew from their degree programs.

Participants That Withdrew

Participants interviewed for the research study who withdrew from their degree program indefinitely were individuals who did not plan to return to a degree program or could not provide a definitive return date. They are defined as unsuccessful participants. These participants were exceptions to the data analyzed. Analyzing data from the three unsuccessful participant interviews, which emerged from interview data of successful participants, helped corroborate the converging research findings. Diverging data were analyzed with and against converging data to refine this study's theoretical footing. This process ensures that the overall findings are sound and reliable and reduces negation.

Lacking Support in Academic Program

Unsuccessful participants endured hardships during their professional degree program.They did not form lasting connections or establish positive expectations. A doctoral student that did not complete her school psychology program, Participant 5, highlighted challenges with forming connections and establishing expectations with others:

> "I felt like I did not fit in the program because, as I said, you had people who would kind of link up and help each other. I feel like I did not have that. I was just kind of non-traditional coming and then leaving to go back home. I feel like I was doing it by myself."

Unsuccessful participants who did not complete their academic program had difficulty personally connecting with others and creating meaningful relationships. They believed that

seeking help from others they did not feel comfortable with was not an option. Although Participant 5 did not feel comfortable with being vulnerable within the program, the summary of professional degree programs' mentoring opportunities are highlighted below:

> "There was not anybody who did any mentoring or do this and do that. They [professors] were busy with their own stuff. No, maybe I did not seek anything. Maybe I did not go in to talk to them. In that program, you have to go in and ask yourself if you need help or not. I am not that person who will go and ask for help like that."

Unsuccessful participants recalled times when they ultimately felt injustices with professors led to undermining the integrity of the program and created mistrust between the first- generation African American student and faculty, as described here:

> "We did not have any Black [professors]. I came into the program for the Black professors, but they left because of some things that happened in the program that was not fair. I felt the program was not fair. It was not." (Participant 5)

Overburdened with Stressful Circumstances

All participants discussed stressful situations. Participants who did not complete their professional program discussed a heightened external stressor that contributed to stress within the program. Unsuccessful participants did not establish a strong social network to process these stressors. They expressed distress due to overwhelming circumstances. During participants' graduate careers, stressful situations influenced their decision to withdraw from their degree program. These circumstances affected first-generation African American graduate students' overall well-being and academic development. An example of first-generation students overburdened with stressful events and not completing graduate school is evident in Participant 5's reports of developing anxiety and depression due to stressful circumstances:

> “Physically, I was stressed out. I was stressed out. I had to report here and there. At one point, I felt like I was a little bit developing some anxiety and a little bit of depression or whatever. I had been really distant.”

Along with Participants 5 and 17, students who did not complete their graduate degree program discussed feeling that they had no choice but to withdraw from their program. The decision to withdraw from graduate school was due to stressful circumstances that impacted their academic performance and ability to establish cohesive systemic social networks. An example of stress created due to academic circumstances that lead to withdrawing from a professional degree program is present in Participant 17's report of faculty making decisions for her after she was admitted to the hospital for childbirth:

> “When I started talking to people on the back end of things [about options for returning to the program], the decision had already been made. It was like you could either be up at the hospital with your child [after childbirth] or come to class. Like there was no way that I was not going to be there [in class]. So that was it. It wasn't a decision I made.”

Like participants 5, 17, and 13, first-generation African American graduate participants lacking academic support regarding alternatives to degree completion were not present. Although Participant 13 discussed supportive classmates, she recounted struggling with caring for a family member’s health and juggling financial hardships. Participants did not have opportunities to collaborate with academic staff during stressful circumstances. Neither did participants communicate to others regarding stressful events or life decisions that impacted their attendance in class. Consequently, participants sustained insufficient social capital and ultimately withdrew from their program of study.

Lacking Connection to Other Students

Students who did not persist did not recall their peers being a prominent contributing factor in their daily academic success. Participants in this study often discussed not having a close bond and connection with their peers, although they believed connecting with peers and supervisors was important. Lacking a special bond could have contributed to the cumulative effects of ultimately withdrawing from their academic program, as described by Participant 5, a doctoral student who withdrew from her program. The student reported lacking connections with other cohort members due to being "one of the only African American women or people in the program" and being poorly connected to peers:

> “For me, I feel like you had to really rely on your cohort to be successful. Then you are always like, for me, one of the only African American women or people in the program. Sometimes you do not have that connection with other students that the other students have with each other.”

Lacking Spiritual Direction

Unsuccessful participants recalled not steadfastly relying on their spirituality. An example of unsuccessful participants' not relying on spiritual resources and direction is evident in Participant 17's description of deficient spiritual capital and support while in graduate school:

> “It wasn't like right now. Now, I'm extremely involved in Church and things like that. Then, even though I had a spiritual life, I wasn't really in a church. I didn't have a church home there. So, I didn't have that, and I think maybe if I prayed a little bit more then, that would've been more helpful than some of the things I was doing then.”

Participants who did not complete their graduate program believed that a lack of faith and spiritual resources resulted in lacking direction. Feeling misguided influenced their ability to form

social networks at Church and to continue in their degree programs. Ultimately, students who withdrew from their program could no longer endure the challenges before them.

Lacking External Support and Balance

As previously discussed, participants who did not complete their graduate program endured hardships and did not establish lasting relationships that could encourage them during difficult times. They lacked networks of people that reinforced intellectual, mental, and spiritual agility. They also lack a solid spiritual foundation, which emerged as a leading contributor to enduring obstacles for first-generation African American graduate students.

Students like Participant 5 attributed their lack of success to difficulty in balancing competing demands, which impacted her well-being and led to withdrawing from the program of study:

> "Stress. Man, I wanted to quit every day. I knew from the first year I wanted to quit. I was ready to go the first year. I wouldn't say I liked it at all. It was stressful and hard to find a balance between school and family. I feel like I never really found that balance. Either I was doing good at school and bad at home as far as neglecting my family duties – kids and husband. Or I was good at home, chilling and having that time, and bad at school. Then when I tried to balance it out, it was like both parts were getting. There was slack on both parts."

Lacking External Support and Coping Mechanisms

Participants who completed their academic program established networks that advocated for the student. Non-persisting students had less benefit from support systems. Hindrances endured compounded barriers to their success. Below is an example of Participant 5 describing a hindrance to success, lacking spiritual-humanistic growth and coping mechanisms:

> "I was like, why can I not get this together? Why can I not get this together? I have been praying. Everyone around me has succeeded. They are doing okay. They relied on God maybe even more than I was. That was a way I had experienced God, faith, and stuff. There was a lot that I prayed about. But I was so anxious about it that I felt like I did not get anything done. I had to take two attempts to get it done. I prayed about it, but nothing was happening. I felt like nothing was happening. I was not moving. He was moving, but I knew I had to move it. I had to have faith, but it just was not happening."

Participants who withdrew from their professional program did not have a solid faith-based social capital network. They identified spiritual resources, such as prayer and devotionals, as tools to reduce stress and motivate. However, resources were ineffective in improving their academic development, reducing life stressors, and creating a balance between work and life. Without systemic spiritual social capital networks first-generation African American graduate students were unable to persist toward degree completion.

Chapter V

Summary, Implications, and Recommendations

This chapter summarizes salient findings and implications for future research and concludes with implications for future practice. This study is the first to gather first-hand information about first-generation African American graduate students' experiences and explain how systemic social support helps students of color. While this study highlights themes that contribute to the academic success of first-generation African American graduate students, it also delineates impediments to enhancing social capital. Hindrances to success include stereotype biases, adverse academic climates that impact first-generation African American graduate students' well-being, and racially charged language. Racially charged language, emphasized in chapter four, was delineated as non-African American peers of participants in this study overtly discussed marginalizing ethnic groups due to their socioeconomic status and need for assistance. Statements made by peers included discussion about not wanting to work with disadvantaged ethnic groups due to their socioeconomic status and generalization about racial groups. Such statements were distressful for the population of this study, evoking emotional and mental disturbances such as anxiety and fears of discriminatory action in academic settings. Implications for practice emphasize actions that foster culturally sensitive and growth-enriching environments for first-generation students of color in higher education.

Social capital networks foster inclusion, are often places of refuge, and are essential for the success of first-generation African American professional degree students. Networks consist of individuals that nurture participants' needs. The networks were crucial to achieving academic goals for students of color who are the first in their families to pursue a graduate or terminal degree. Creating bonds with other students is supported by literature about social capital networks; including Lin (1999), who found that the nature of social capital determines a student's success. The

findings in the study indicate that seeking connections with others who have similar sociocultural makeup mitigates race-based judgment, marginalization, and degradation stressors. In social, cultural, and spiritual networks, first-generation students of color engaged in socially enriching systemic interactions with others with similar sociocultural and spiritual values. The network of individuals that participants assigned to their mental rolodex of support contributed to alleviating stressors and improving their well-being, including depressive symptoms. Within sociocultural and spiritual networks, students focused on opportunities that promoted positive development and social, cultural, and spiritual values. Sociocultural and spiritual networks enhanced students functioning through encouragement and advocacy, mitigated first- generational academic risks, and contributed to reducing distressful mental health symptoms. Due to the positive and reinforcing nature of relationships created through social capital and systemic networks, participants moved toward success despite negative influences in their program, such as stereotype biases and unsolicited comments.

While social capital was pertinent in enriching first-generation graduate students of color, the presence of and wish for spiritual resources was salient in the findings. All 17 participants discussed spirituality. Successful participants recalled spirituality as integral to their success. Successful students discussed spirituality and spiritual networks positively contributing to their success. Two of the three unsuccessful students recalled a lack of spiritual-humanistic growth contributing to non-persistence within their program of study. The third unsuccessful participant mentioned spirituality and did not attribute lacking spiritual-humanistic values to withdrawing from her program of study. This study indicated that emerging connections with cohort members empowered students to deepen their bond with someone that would assist them in advancing toward graduation. The findings of this study relate to past literature by supporting researchers' findings of students of color facing tremendous challenges and persevering due to having immense

sociocultural and spiritual support (Haskins et al., 2013; Stebleton & Soria, 2012;). This research study contributes to new knowledge in marriage and family therapy highlighting systemic influences of sociocultural and spiritual systems, creating an awareness about marginalized populations, and providing considerations for practice by examining interconnected systems that benefit this study's population. It highlights the nature of systemic networks and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging spiritual humanistic values and sociocultural and spiritual support in generating a theory that explains the influences of social capital on first- generation African American graduate students.

Faculty Support That Leads to Success

Social capital networks that foster inclusivity contribute to first-generation African American graduate students' perception of support. They help first-generation graduate students of color connect with others, advancing their academic development. When institutional agents cultivate social capital elements within social networks, students perceive them more positively, strengthening trust, which is a core element of social capital. Affirming interactions and motivating feedback encourages students to voice their concerns, decreasing speechlessness due to fears of degrading comments. Increased engagement contributes to participants in this study continuing to persevere within their program of study. The findings of this study relate to the literature review by highlighting a relationship between social capital-enriching systemic interactions that enhance first-generation African American graduate students and their network. Participants felt supported when they received personalized direction from faculty and administrative staff. They were more trusting and willing to discuss personal concerns. First-generation Black graduate students felt motivated to overcome difficult stressors by processing struggles with empathic faculty and staff. When faculty cultivate welcoming environments, first- generation students of color are responsive to personalized direction, constructive feedback, and guidance. Welcoming environments encouraged

by faculty and staff and constructive feedback led to affirming interactions that allowed first-generation African American graduate students to develop trust. Overall, the present study aligns with the literature review as the presence of a supportive social capital network mitigates feelings of exclusion, contributing to perseverance and academic development. The presence of supportive and empathic professors inspires learning and growth and contributes to first-generation African American graduate students' success.

Practicing Spiritual Self-Care Is Important

Every participant in this study recalled the importance of spirituality and spiritual networks during their graduate career. Participants who were persisting in their degree plans or had already graduated utilized spiritual networks and believed that the spiritual networks were supportive by encouraging, motivating, and uplifting them. Spiritual networks assisted in enhancing participants' self-efficacy and imparting spiritual-humanistic and cultural values that promoted purposeful living, discipline, and growth. Spirituality and spiritual networks provided necessary tools that relieved students of daily stressors, including academic concerns. Spiritual networks consisted of church members and other members of faith– individuals with a strong sense of spirituality and purpose that they attribute to God, who uplifted participants. Participants' spiritual network was revitalizing for their well-being. The support system provided tools for growing spiritually, mentally, and academically. The nature of relationships within the network helped participants utilize prayer circles, devotionals, and resourceful faith-based information. As participants became disenchanted with their programs for various reasons, they relied on their spirituality to cope with challenges and encourage them to persist and overcome hardships. In this research study, successfully graduated and currently enrolled participants utilized their spirituality to provide purpose, create meaning, and restore faith, which promoted self-care and growth. Practicing self-care was helpful when participants proactively engaged in coping skills while managing academic

and personal stressors. They discovered spaces within their academic college to pray with cohort members and practice solitude. Praying with others improved participants' mental health as they found new meaning to remaining in their program. The literature review on spirituality relates to this study, highlighting spiritual networks and the importance of spirituality to first-generation African American graduate students' success. These networks motivated first-generation students of color in higher education to practice self-care. They encouraged optimism, contributing to their effectiveness and academic identity (Smith,1985).

This study supports social capital and systemic support research by emphasizing the importance of a spiritual network and integrating all aspects of first-generation African American professional degree students' lives into their higher education. Race, gender, and first-generation status are focal points of their lives (Henfield et al., 2011). Affirming intersectional aspects of African American and first-generation graduate students' lives is vital to their well-being. Focusing on intersectionality and spirituality as contributing factors to this population's success, new information about how these students manage stressors better when connected to a spiritual network affirms their different identities (Smith, 1985). Using resources provided within a spiritual network to improve stress management enhances participants' academic development and mental health. This finding supports the research question. It highlights spiritual networks that provide social capital elements within networks and enhance the students' self-efficacy while decreasing barriers to achievement. Salient findings of spirituality relate to the literature review by highlighting systemic networks that encouraged and emphasized spiritual practices that align with participants' needs.

First-generation students of color in higher education believe that program culture rarely aligns with their needs. Due to lacking awareness of cultural need, this population often feels excluded from meaningful information and interactions, resulting in their seeking support outside of

an academic environment (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). Previous literature supports this finding as this population joins collective networks to find systemic and validating support. Collaborative networks pride themselves on a communal purpose, creating meaning, and incorporating intersections of individuals to combat obstacles through a collective effort (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). Spirituality relates to the research question by focusing on communal efforts to help participants in this study achieve success. Relying on their spirituality and resources helps this population create meaning and purpose when enduring challenges and persevere through difficult circumstances, contributing to their success and graduation.

African Americans are more likely to rely on spirituality and religiosity than other cultures (Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Spirituality and religious activities function as social, civic, and community roles within African American cultural framework (Taylor & Chatters, 2010). Abrums (2010) remarked that the Black community uses spirituality as a coping skill. First- generation African American graduate students in this study relied heavily on spiritual resources, which encouraged them to persevere in distressing times. All participants recalled spiritual resources that aided them in shifting their perspective and persisting despite negative experiences and re-occurring stressors within their program. Spirituality and religious activities shape the Black community's beliefs about their circumstances. Spiritual involvement imparts values that uplift African American populations (Abrums, 2010). So, it is no surprise that Grimmett's (2010) study concurs with this research as spiritual resources resonated with African Americans who were the first in their family to pursue graduate education. Due to their enhanced spirituality, they embarked on their journey with a renewed perspective that highlighted the positives and gratitude for their experience and provided a purpose for moving forward.

Findings of spirituality suggest that when working with first-generation African American professional degree students, one must consider their spiritual and academic needs. Anyone

working with this population must assess for spiritual foundations that could encourage students' development. A needs-based student-centered approach to assist first-generation African American graduate students is needed. Faculty and administrative staff should engage with students of color to support their cultural and spiritual needs.

Limitations of Research Study Addressed

There are three limitations to examine: self-reported data challenges and their influence on the data need to be considered; using a purposive sampling method of first-generation African American graduate students entails examining cultural and racial challenges that influence participant's experiences and success; and third, exploring the research topic over time implies further enhancing the roadmap for creating an inclusive environment by systemic means.

Self-reported data is ambiguous data in nature. Glorification of positive experiences and an omission of negative experiences may warrant concern. In this research study, most participants recounted positive aspects of their successful journey. However, they often requested that negative encounters be omitted or discussed before or after their interview. The request to exclude information discussed before or after an interview is noteworthy. Obstacles to success were examined and considered a hindrance to participants' overall development and success. There was an apparent apprehension of retaliation, creating a barrier to success. Fear of reprisals and biases addresses program culture. Participants' fear and anxiety of retaliation when discussing academic affairs with an outside agent sheds light on an adversarial academic culture that needs to be examined to eradicate indignities, biases, racial stereotypes, and degradation of Black students in higher education. Snowball referring strategy focuses on a specific sample that is purposefully selected for the research study. After subjects are identified and voluntary participates in the study, the researcher asks participants to assist in identifying potential participants. Without additional access and time to recruit a larger sample size, the research is specific to Southern states.

Lastly, due to time constraints, the researcher did not have more time to recruit first-generation African American graduate students in other regions of the United States and the world. The sample size in this study was rare and challenging to recruit, despite purposive sampling and snowball referring strategy. Future researchers seeking to investigate first- generation African American graduate students should consider a longitudinal study over an extended period to examine linkages between data.

Implications for Future Research

Implications for future research must focus on examining systemic networks that foster spiritual-humanistic and sociocultural (SSG) growth and values and advance first-generation African American graduate students. Examining SSG values of first-generation students of color in higher education provides awareness and understanding about the connection between intersectionality and successful outcomes. Researching intersectionality and SSG will create a heightened understanding of assisting with successful outcomes in the marriage and family therapy profession and higher education for underserved and often forgotten populations. Promoting SSG values and intersectionality will also help scholars assist first-generation African American and Black students to succeed in higher education. Researchers should investigate systemic racial and cultural (SRC) matters related to SSG and intersectionality in graduate education. Integrating policies and procedures that address and eradicate adverse racial and cultural challenges and incorporate student-centered needs are critical topics to explore to further the research on this population. Addressing SSG matters and SRC challenges will shed light on the lives of first-generation graduate students of color and further the research on this study's topic.

The current study’s aim was to explain the experiences of first-generation African American graduate students, systems and factors that influence their development, and how to enhance their development and success. Focusing on differentiating degree type and level of degree

did not align with the purpose of this relevant research. However, it would be important for scholars to investigate topics regarding the influences of systemic factors and social capital on first-generation African American graduate students' success.

Implications for Practice

A salient theme emerging from recursively comparing the data included first-generation African American graduate students incorporating spiritual values into their daily routines. Each participant discussed the importance of spirituality. For the majority of participants, implementing spiritual-humanistic values into their academic work led to integrating spirituality into their daily routine. Incorporating spiritual practices into their daily routine impelled participants to instinctively utilize spiritual traditions. Traditions and resources helped the participants feel purposeful and seek networks that would aid their success. African Americans positively relate social support to religious and spiritual support (Grimmett, 2010). Emerging data from this research highlighted the importance of spiritual-humanistic and cultural values and social capital influences on academic success for first-generation graduate students of color. For those students with active engagement in spiritual resources, spirituality guided them, acted as an intermediary agent, and contributed to mitigating stressors. Participants' SSG beliefs empowered them to overcome adverse interactions, including systemic racial concerns that impacted their development.

Each systemic network approach to supporting these students to become successful graduates is pertinent to their academic development and overall growth. In considering implications for practice, it is critical to explore systemic networks and SSG values of first-generation African American graduate students. It is important to note that affirming spiritual-humanistic and cultural values that guide students' development is crucial for their success. Exploring SSG values and needs and identifying and mitigating SRC challenges have contributed to students' successful outcomes and is a necessary first step when working with this population.

Conclusion

This study employed a grounded theory methodology. When analyzing the data in grounded theory research, the primary investigator tests findings with and against other findings including divergent cases. Using constant comparison methods, recursivity, and bracketing ensures that emerging data is reliable, valid, and aligns with thematic analysis and theory formulation. This process ensures that the researcher is aware of reflexivity and that there is no erroneous data analysis. Higher education institutions, especially systemic-oriented marriage and family therapy programs of study must become more aware of African American first-generation graduate students' SSG, academic needs, and SRC challenges.

First-generation minority students have encountered barriers to success due to cumulative disadvantages and poor academic support. While programs address cumulative disadvantages at the primary level, there is little research about support for first-generation African American students pursuing professional degree programs. This study confirmed that cultural and racial challenges deterred unsuccessful participants from continuing their education and hindered the development of successful students. Also, this study highlighted new knowledge regarding spirituality's influence on the ability of first-generation graduate students of color to succeed in overcoming barriers to persistence toward completion in their graduate programs. Networks promoting cultural sensitivity, inclusion, intersectionality, and spirituality empower participants to persevere despite challenges. Further validating the role of spirituality as part of a theory of first-generation African American graduate student success, those participants who did not persist in their programs of study identified not being able to employ active spiritual resources as a significant element in their decision to withdraw from their degree programs. Findings from this study confirm the importance of spiritual development as it enhances first-generation African American graduate students' self-efficacy, academic and professional identity, and successful outcomes (Grimmett, 2010).

Inclusive environments are at the crux of current society's discussions. Examining academic environments that facilitate systemic practices in professional schools is critical in the evolution of first-generation African American graduate students' success. Exploring first- generation African American graduate students' needs will contribute to culturally inclusive and affirming academic environments for students of color pursuing a professional degree. Overtime, expounding on this research topic will further enhance a roadmap for creating policies and procedures that support first-generation Black graduate students' needs.

Overall, marriage and family therapy programs must explore fundamental aspects of first-generation African American graduate students' needs to facilitate success. Professional degree programs contribute to obstacles endured by first-generation African American students by not mitigating barriers or actively advocating for them, especially during times of distress. This study found that first-generation African American students often endure disadvantages, such as adverse racial interactions, that impede their academic growth and success. However, when a part of a social capital network promotes spiritual and cultural needs, this population thrives. This research study highlights some significant contributors to this population persevering through their graduate education due to the encouragement appreciated by the social capital networks they became members of. Notably, social capital networks, specifically spiritual networks, cultivated meaning, purpose, and belonging for participants, nurturing spiritual- humanistic and cultural values. While the literature on first-generation African American graduate students is scant, this research delineated social networks that influenced this population's success. It contributed to new knowledge regarding systemic networks for underserved populations in marriage and family therapy programs and in practice.

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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

1) Describe the guided support that you receive when in graduate school. How did this support help you to graduate?

2) Who guided you in the process of obtaining internships, access to information, and access to outside resources while in graduate school? Elaborate on the steps taken in the process.

3) How would you describe your experience of being a first-generation African American student in your graduate or professional degree program?

4) How supportive were your peers and professors in assisting you with your concerns before and after you graduated? What steps were taken to initiate communication with peers and professors?

5) How could you have furthered your academic achievement and career success? Who could assist you in that goal? How have they assisted you? What actions were taken when they helped you?

6) What resonated with you during your journey of achieving a graduate or professional degree as a first-generation African American student?

7) How did your program prepare you for career success? How did you prepare yourself? What steps and actions were taken to prepare you for success?

8) Who or what motivated you to succeed in college and pursue your degree further? In what ways did the motivation inspire you or discouraged you from seeking a higher degree?

9) How did you cope with the rigors of graduate school? What resources did you depend on to motivate you?

10) How were you informed or not of different opportunities to help with continuing your degree?