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## African American Freshman Students' Perceptions of Student Persistence at a Historically Black College

Callie Taylor Herd  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Callie Taylor Herd

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

African American Freshman Students' Perceptions of Student Persistence at a

Historically Black College

by

Callie Taylor Herd

MEd, Bethel University, 2011

MBA, Bethel University, 2009

BS, University of Memphis, 1990

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

June 2021

## Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was the low retention of African American freshmen at a private Historically Black College. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to learn what factors influence an at-risk freshman student's decision to persist or leave college so that interventions related to positive change can be proposed. Tinto's student integration model and Bean's causal model of student attrition were the conceptual frameworks that grounded this study. The research question focused on African American freshman students' experiences that influenced their ability to persist. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 purposely selected participants representing first-year students at the study site. Open coding data analysis was performed to identify emerging themes from participants' interview responses. The results revealed that many of the participants experienced difficulty in adjusting to their first year of college. Data also indicated that the faculty and staff could benefit from learning more about the factors that support or hinder student persistence. The results led to the creation of a 3-day professional development workshop that was focused on increasing student persistence. The study results and workshop may help leaders to develop support programs at the research site that are effective in helping at-risk first-year freshmen navigate through their college experience successfully. The study results may contribute to positive social change by providing information that will support institutional changes at HBCUs to ensure that at-risk African American freshman students persist past their first year. Students may then be better prepared to take on leadership roles and responsibilities within their community and beyond its borders.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this project study to my family that has supported me throughout my journey in higher education: my mother, the late Hattie Mae Taylor; my father, the late Arthur Taylor Sr.; my brother, the late Arthur Taylor Jr; and my other siblings, Lizzie, Ernest, Michael, and Dorothy. I will always be grateful to my children: Ronald, Molisa, and Jordan. I thank them for believing in, and never giving up on, me as I sought to accomplish my doctorate. They always gave me words of encouragement and helped to keep me on track when I did not see the light. Their belief in me has allowed me to become stronger and driven to pursue and complete my studies to receive my doctorate. My children have been such a blessing in my life. I will cherish their good deeds for the rest of my life. I also devote my study to all students in elementary, middle, and high school and college to encourage them to persist regardless of what the odds may be. Life challenges go to those who think they can. If you believe in yourself and have faith, you can do anything if you put your mind to it. Never allow what one thinks of you to become your reality. Know that you control your destiny, and always keep your eyes on the prize. Dreams can be achieved. Believe, Believe, and Believe!

## Acknowledgments

I first thank God, who is the head of my life, for allowing me to persist and never give up through my faith. I also thank God for directing and ordering my path and bringing my committee members into my life. I express my gratitude to Dr. Boyd Dressler, who has been a very supportive chair. Thank you, Dr. Boyd, for challenging me at times to produce my very best work. Thank you also to the other members of my doctoral committee, Dr. Elsa Gonzalez and Dr. Sydney Parent. Both graciously shared their valuable expertise and provided timely and practical feedback. Special thanks to Dr. JCY for her support and belief in me and my journey. Thanks to Bishop Kevin B. Willis Sr., Prophetess Lisa Gibson and the Intercessors, Pastor Calvin King, and my church family for their prayers and support. Also, thanks to my family and friends who never doubted me when I stated that I would be getting my doctorate. You encouraged me when the light seemed dim but knew that I would ultimately reach the finish line. You will always be remembered. Lastly, I thank my editor, Dr. Gwendolyn Ward, who has been my lifeline and who believed in me reaching my goal. I will always be appreciative of her.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

There is a growing concern among policy makers and college and university leaders regarding the decline in graduation completion rates at U.S. postsecondary institutions. Low completion rates have drawn national attention for several years. Former President Obama addressed the issue a decade ago during a speech at the University of Texas at Austin. President Obama remarked,

Over a third of America's college students and over half of our minority students do not earn a degree, even after six years. So, we don't just need to open the doors of college to more Americans; we need to make sure they stick with it through graduation. That is critical. (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2010, para. 34)

Sciarra et al. (2016) acknowledged that a postsecondary degree was necessary for obtaining future employment and for economic stability. In 2015, three quarters of the fastest-growing occupations in the United States required education and training beyond a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The decline in college completion rates has brought awareness to the importance of student persistence and academic success.

### **Definition of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study was the low retention of African American freshmen at a private HBCU, Victory University (VU, a pseudonym). VU promotes an open admissions policy. Many of the first-time freshmen admitted into VU are not

prepared for college or college-ready, according to the executive director of admission and recruitment and the institutional research director. The executive director of admission and recruitment noted that freshmen tend to have difficulty with reading, writing, or performing basic math. Allensworth and Clark (2020) considered high school grade point average (GPA) to be more significant than standardized test scores when predicting a student's academic ability to continue enrollment in college. Similarly, Sciarra et al. (2016) supported the validity of GPA and test scores as predictors when considered in conjunction with students' performance in other precollege programs. The average GPA for incoming first-time first-year students at VU is 2.5, according to the executive director of admission and recruitment. The 2018-2019 freshmen American College Testing (ACT) composite score for the students was 14, which was below the 25th percentile (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.b). The state's ACT composite score was 19.6, while the national score was 20.8 (de Brey et al., 2019).

### **First-Year Experience Programs**

To assist incoming first-time freshmen with the transition from high school to college, VU offers a Summer Bridge Program. The purpose of the program is to improve student college persistence by helping students adapt to the academic, social, and emotional demands of the college environment (Appleby, 2017; Howard & Sharpe, 2019; State Higher Education Commission, 2020). The program is intended for students who score less than 15 on the ACT or whose GPA is low, according to the executive director of enrollment. The official also stated that students are encouraged to attend the Summer Bridge Program to increase their likelihood of academic success. Although VU offered a

Summer Bridge Program before the 2019 freshman year, only 50% of the eligible students attended, the executive director of enrollment stated. The institutional research director noted that there were 150 first-time freshmen enrolled at VU in 2019. Sixty of the students met the requirements to participate in the program, but only 30 attended, according to the executive director of enrollment.

The state's department of education no longer requires local schools to display on student transcripts if a student has a special education diploma or an individual evaluation plan, the executive director of enrollment stated. Some first-time first-year students admitted to VU who have special learning needs often have difficulty learning in regular courses. Student education records are official and confidential documents protected by U.S. privacy protection laws of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that restrict some information from being disclosed (Barr et al., 1995). Barr et al. (1995) pointed out that the requirements for what information is disclosed on high school diplomas can change. Some students' programs of study under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act may not disclose certain special education language needed for colleges to address a student's learning needs; thus, institutions "have the flexibility to select the specific aid or service it provides" (Barr et al., 1995, para. 17).

VU does not offer transition courses that help students with learning challenges adapt to the expectations of a 4-year college program. After the freshman year or at the end of the spring semester, students who do not maintain a 2.0 GPA are placed on academic probation and enrolled in an academic intervention management program,



stated the executive director of enrollment. The academic intervention management program is a supportive measure for students on academic probation to help them attain good standing, according to Victory University's 2019 undergraduate catalog. Rather than try to improve their grades, when students do not meet the academic requirements of the academic intervention management program, they usually drop out at the end of the freshman year of college and do not return for the second school year, noted the executive director of enrollment. Some students take remedial courses to become successful while attending college (Bettinger et al., 2013; Boatman & Long, 2018). According to the executive director of enrollment, VU does not test the freshmen students to see if they need remedial courses. To help the students become successful and persist, VU offers a two-semester freshman seminar course during the fall and subsequent spring semester, declared the student support services. After the students complete the seminar courses, they can begin taking their 100-level courses. As students move forward from the seminar courses into their regular classes, other factors may need to be addressed to keep students productive (Bir & Myrick, 2015).

### **Limited Financial Resources**

Some of the students at the study site do not have the finances to attend college without the assistance of grants, scholarships, and loans. VU reported that 96% of the incoming first-time freshmen in 2018 received some form of financial aid, with 88% of the students receiving Pell Grants (NCES, n.d.b). According to the executive director of enrollment, some students attend VU because they see it as an easy way to get the money from their financial aid during their freshman year. However, Pell Grants come with

certain guidelines that determine a student's ongoing eligibility. If a student does not maintain fulltime status and at least a 2.0 GPA, they cannot receive state and federal financial aid and could be subject to repayment of the Pell Grant award received, confirmed the executive director of enrollment (Maguire, 2019).

### **First-Year Student Retention**

The first-year retention rate at VU of full-time students in 2018 was 62%; for part-time students, it was 50% (NCES, n.d.a). The national student retention rate was 73.8% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). As stated by the institutional research director, a majority of the VU students are from low-income backgrounds and are first-generation students lacking preparation for the academic rigor of college. This study focused on first-year student retention rates at VU. According to the executive director of enrollment and the institutional research director, although VU educators implement a variety of support services programs to improve the first-year retention, the percentage of students who persists remains low and below the national average. As affirmed by the executive director of enrollment and the director of admission and recruitment, many freshmen drop out of VU at the end of the first year and do not return. Tinto (2012) stated, "The process of persistence is not the mirror image of the process of leaving" (p. 5). The author expressed that the cause for a student leaving an institution does not always connect with the reason why they persist. The gap in practice is the need for educational support and mentoring programs to assist students in their academics. Some of the faculty do not have the experience or training needed to assist the students with their courses, stated the executive director of admission and recruitment.

The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau showed that graduation rates for African Americans were low (Karanja & Austin, 2014). Baker and Robnett (2012) reported that African Americans along with Latino students were more likely than students in other racial and ethnic groups in the United States to leave college early. Approximately 67% of all students leave 4-year institutions within the first 2 years (Kopp & Shaw, 2015). Only 12% of all college students were Black in 2017 compared to 61% who were White (Cahalan et al., 2018). The remaining ethnic groups comprised 27% of all college students (Cahalan et al., 2018). HBCUs disproportionately enroll more poor and academically at-risk students than predominately White institutions (PWIs; Franke & DeAngelo, 2018; Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Nevertheless, public criticism over student attrition calls for colleges and universities to be more accountable in supporting students' persistence to graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Higher education leaders must early on determine which freshmen need support and work to get those students college-ready as quickly as possible or risk them dropping out altogether.

### **Rationale**

This study was warranted because there is a shortage of research on the factors contributing to student persistence as it relates to at-risk African American freshmen at HBCUs. The study results provide VU leaders with information to help guide the development of programs to ensure persistence and to encourage African American college students who have dropped out to return to the classroom and help students to complete their degrees. Due to the concern about the steady decline in student retention, VU made addressing the issue a priority in its strategic plan, noted the executive director

of admission and recruitment. The director stated that VU administration must determine the causes of low freshman persistence because of its impact on student enrollment and revenue for the institution. Tinto (2006, 2017a) expressed that there is not just one institutional action that improves the persistence of all students. Understanding freshman students' ability to persist allows institutions to develop supports that help students achieve their academic goals while in college (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tinto, 2006). Bir and Myrick (2015) observed that as students persist and move forward from the first to the second year, it is logical to assume that other supports may be needed to keep them engaged and focused.

The literature on student persistence in higher education pertains mostly to retaining students for 1 year. Some researchers have pointed out reasons for engaging and retaining Black college students (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Hunn, 2014; Swail et al., 2003). However, there are inconsistencies in the research. First, many researchers studying Black college students' persistence have used the context of PWIs even though some of the problems experienced by students at these institutions are significantly different from those experienced by students at HBCUs (Bir & Myrick, 2015). In addition, some researchers who have examined the relationship between student persistence and college outcomes have scrutinized single institutions rather than comparing multiple institutions (Feldman & Newcomb, 2020; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). The approach limits the information on what happens when successful students persist. Little evidence exists on the experience of at-risk freshmen with similar backgrounds who persist during the first year of college, which justified the need for this study.

A great deal of research exists about retention of minorities in general and African American students, specifically. This research indicates that student persistence and student engagement are important in helping students to increase their retention and completion of their studies (Alexander & Gardner, 2009; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Owolabi, 2018; Tinto, 1999). Student retention is a part of contemporary student support services. Student retention is looked on by many institutions as a necessary component to be addressed (Owolabi, 2018; Tinto, 1999). Colleges normally address the problem by adding a course, seminar, or mentoring program (Holt & Fifer, 2018; Tinto, 1999). Research is needed, however, to better understand what helps first-year freshmen students to persist or be successful at VU. Understanding what factors relate to student persistence is necessary to maximize student success (Bjerke & Healy, 2010; Millea et al., 2018).

The highest levels of attrition are from Year 1 to Year 2. When students do not persist, not only is the individual student affected but the college also because of the financial loss and potential damage to its reputation. Alijohani (2016) and Raisman (2013) affirmed that retention and attrition cause higher education institutions to lose the revenue needed to support operations. The attrition constitutes a loss of tuition, room and board, and other fees paid directly to the college. Students may also enroll in another institution and graduate. Institutions see attrition as a sense of failure because the student did not complete their studies (Kopp & Shaw, 2015; Owolabi, 2018). Higher retention rates are linked to institutional success (Burke, 2019). Hu et al. (2011) expressed the

importance of finding innovative ways that can improve student persistence while also enhancing student learning outcomes (p. 394).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to learn what factors influence an at-risk freshman student's decision to persist or leave college so that interventions to positive change can be proposed. Factors identified in the research that pertain to student persistence include socioeconomic status, family, and student engagement with faculty (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dyce, 2015; Parsons et al., 2005). To address the problem, I examined the perceptions of freshmen to understand how they were able to persist and experience success. Tinto (2017a) considered it important to understand successful freshmen experiences to develop programming that addresses the problem of persistence. Research has shown that understanding students' needs can increase student retention and improve persistence (Caruth, 2018).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following list of terms and phrases is provided to assist readers in developing a common understanding of their meaning and use in this study:

*At-risk students:* Students who are not experiencing academic success in school and are identified as more likely to fail and drop out (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013; Strauss, 2019).

*Attrition:* A student's departure from an institution (Ishitani, 2006).

*COVID-19:* The name of the disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus responsible for a disease outbreak that originated in China in late 2019 (Sheposh, 2021).

*First-generation students:* College students whose parents or guardians did not attend any type of higher education (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

*First-time students:* Students with no previous enrollment at any college or institution of higher education (Cahalan et al., 2018).

*Freshman:* A student in a first-year class of a 4-year college (Ritzer & Sleigh, 2019).

*Freshman graduation rate:* The overall graduation percentage rate of full-time, first-time students who began in the fall term and completed their normal program within 6 years (Ross et al., 2012).

*Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU):* Any historically Black college or university established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that was accredited and whose primary mission is to educate African Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2019; see also United Negro College Fund, 2013).

*Low income:* Individuals or families whose incomes are below twice the federal poverty threshold (Gustafsson & Pedersen, 2018).

*Persistence:* The student's ability to remain enrolled at the same college each year until completion (Browning et al., 2018).

*Retention:* An institution's ability to retain first-time, full-time students from freshman year through the sophomore year (Aud et al., 2013; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

*Socioeconomic status:* The social standing or class of an individual. Some of the factors being measured are income, occupation, and education (Patel et al., 2019).

*Student engagement:* The investment of time and energy that students devote to educational activities and the involvement of the institutions in using effective education practices for the students (Kuh et al., 2008).

*Traditional students:* Students who enter or enroll in college between the ages of 18 and 24 (Aud et al., 2013).

*TRIO:* Federally funded programs authorized under the Higher Education Act that identify and provide academic continuum services from precollege to pregraduate level to low-income, first-generation, and disabled students (U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2019).

*Upward Bound:* A federal TRIO program that focuses on disadvantaged high school students that helps them succeed in their precollege performance and eventually in their higher education pursuits (U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2019).

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of the study may highlight appropriate strategies that VU leaders can use to increase freshmen persistence. Staff members at other HBCUs experiencing similar challenges may also use the research findings in their review, improvement, and modification of current student engagement programs. In this way, the study may serve as a guide to practitioners in the development of strategies to close the gaps in existing support programs. Also, the study results may be used to help create a college culture that is supportive and conducive to students persisting and excelling academically. The research may reveal better ways to prepare students for college success. Last, the findings



from this study may contribute to more African American students obtaining their degrees and becoming prepared to take on responsibilities within their community and companies and organizations.

### **Research Question**

The problem at VU is that freshmen students are not persisting during their first year in college. Many do not return to VU for their sophomore year. The focus of the study was on understanding the perspectives of African American college students about persisting at an HBCU. I sought to answer the following research question: How do academically at-risk first-year students at one HBCU describe what factors support and hinder their persistence during their first year in college?

### **Review of the Literature**

The literature review provides conceptual perspectives on student persistence as it related to African American freshmen in higher education. I used the Walden University Library to access online databases such as Education Research Complete, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Academic Search Ultimate, and Google Scholar as well as dissertations through ProQuest. A systematic search of the literature published from 2016 onward was conducted using the following keywords and phrases: *African American students*, *HBCU*, *higher education*, *student persistence*, and *student retention*. In subsequent searches, the keywords *student engagement*, *first-generation students*, *freshman/first-year seminars*, *socioeconomic status*, *academic self-efficacy*, and *student support services* were used.

The impact of student persistence on students remaining enrolled in college was little explored until the early 1970s (Nutt, 2003). In 1977, Astin published research on the

characteristics of the students who did not persist rather than why they did persist. The issues of student retention and persistence have continued to gain importance in discussions of higher education in the United States (Alijohani, 2016; Banks & Dohy, 2019; Kimbark, 2015; Nutt, 2003; Tinto, 2017a). Addressing these concerns is important because more than one half of all students who enter HBCUs leave prematurely (Brock, 2010; Gentry, 2014; Kimbark, 2015; Kuh et al., 2011; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 1994).

There have been intense debates by educators about college persistence rates to determine viable strategies for student success (College Board Advocacy, 2009; Gopalakrishnan et al., 2017). The *U.S. News & World Report (Freshmen Retention Rate: National Universities, 2020)* conveyed that about one third of college freshmen drop out before sophomore year. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018) reported that Black students had the lowest persistence rate with just over half returning to the starting institution. Hu et al. (2011) suggested that educational practitioners and policy makers need to collaborate to develop ways to improve high school students' learning outcomes so the students will be more prepared to attend college. The approach prepares graduates to compete in a constantly changing world.

Nationally, the first-year attrition rate is high, with approximately 50% of enrolled students leaving college before the second year (Browning et al., 2018; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018; Owolabi, 2018). Chen (2013) stated that because attrition is high for freshmen students, improving student academic success during the first year should be the primary focus of higher education. Browning et al. (2018),

Simmons (2013), and Tinto (1993) maintained that African American students do persist in college when their college experience includes academic and social integration. Even though colleges and universities have invested in programs designed to help increase first-year student retention, student persistence remains an issue that must be addressed by higher education institutions.

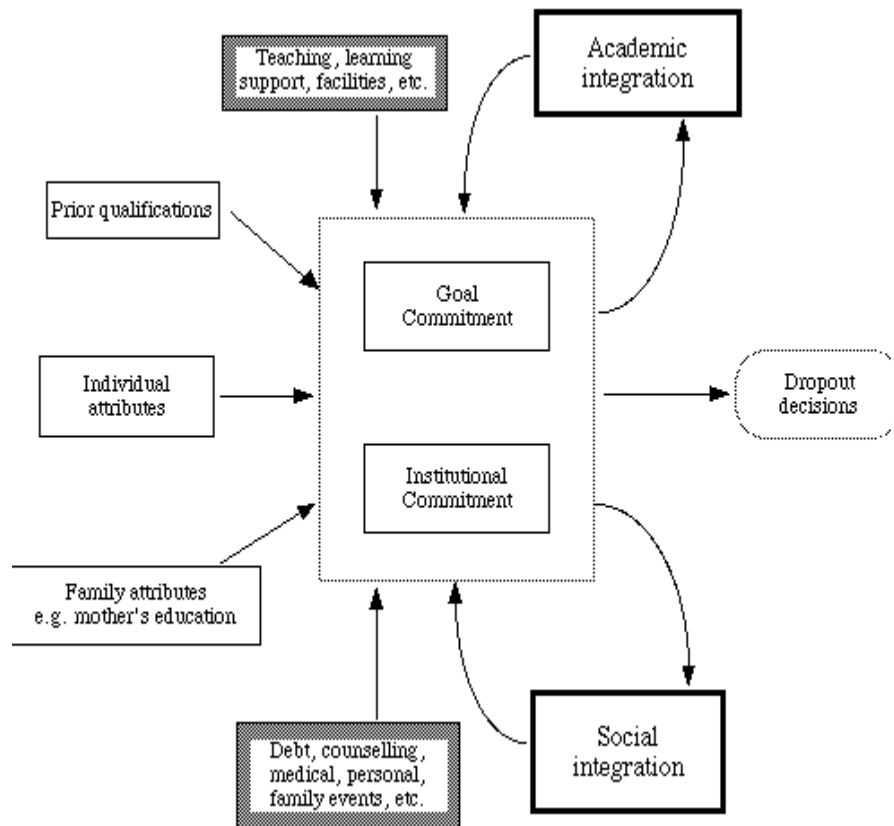
The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to learn what factors influence an at-risk freshman student's decision to persist or leave college so that interventions related to positive change can be proposed. I examined freshmen perceptions of student retention practices at VU. The results may inform the VU administration about possible factors to improve student persistence.

### **Conceptual Framework**

One product of qualitative processes of theorization is the conceptual framework. Jabareen (2009) stated, "A conceptual framework is not merely a collection of concepts but rather, a construct in which each concept plays an integral role" (p. 51). Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration model and Bean's (1980, 1982) causal model of student attrition provided the framework for this study to examine freshmen perceptions of student retention practices. The models place the burden of success on students' characteristics, experiences, and commitment to their educational goals. I explored the validity of these claims, mainly as they applied to African American freshmen at the study site, to understand reasons why some freshmen persist and others do not.

### ***Tinto's Student Integration Model***

Tinto has had a major influence on the research and study of student persistence. Tinto (1975) provided insight into why students dropped out of college. The student integration model was initially used to show why students left their college or university using a longitudinal model (Tinto, 1975). The student integration model shows the impact students' decision on leaving college before graduation has on their characteristics (Tinto, 1975). A disadvantage of the student integration model (see Figure 1) was that it was not used initially for traditional-aged students from minority backgrounds, but White students (Tinto, 1993, 1994). It was not until 1997 that Tinto changed his focus to include the students' educational experience in the classroom. Tinto (1975) stated that the rate of attrition would decrease if students received help in the school. Tinto's earlier models did not address the connection between factors such as the students' education, their persistence, their school involvement, and how much effort the students put into their work (Tinto, 1975).

**Figure 1***Tinto's Student Integration Model*

*Note.* Adapted from “Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research,” by V. Tinto, 1975, *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), p. 95 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/1170024>). Copyright SAGE Publishing.

Tinto recognized three reasons for student departure. These departures were academic difficulties, the student’s inability to determine their educational and career goals, and the student’s failure to become a part of both the academic and social life of the institution (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Also, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) studied measurements of student persistence for several years and even developed the now frequently mentioned model of student departure. According to Rendón et al. (2000), social and academic

integration are necessary for student retention in Tinto's model (p. 127). Tinto (1987, 1993) emphasized that an incoming student's persistence is greatly impacted by total academic and social integration levels. Furthermore, Tinto (1993) contended that if a student has a high academic and social integration level than the student's chances of remaining in college increases. Tinto's theory provided a framework for understanding why students at VU may not persist through to degree completion, along with offering ways that services and supports can assist in improving retention.

### ***Bean's Causal Model of Student Attrition***

Bean's (1980) model of student persistence addresses factors presumed to affect the student's decision to depart from the college institution. The model addresses four areas: dropout, satisfaction and institutional commitment, organizational determinants, and background variables. In this study, I examined each variable from the student perspective. Bean (1982) described students' intent to depart or leave as meaning the same thing as it relates to students no longer wanting to remain at their institution of higher learning.

Bean's (1990) model cited psychological factors linked to specific behaviors regarding disenrollment and assessed the influence of external factors that may contribute to a student's decision to unenroll. These factors include employment while enrolled, integration into the broader campus environment, and intent about whether the student plans to graduate. Bean and Eaton (2000) suggested that factors affecting student retention and persistence to graduation are associated with everyone's psychological motives. Overall, the student needs to play a significant role in students' academic and

social integration. Bean (1990) argued that personal efficacy is formed by students' attitudes, behaviors, and subsequent intent. Also, student experiences with the institution influence their attitudes and outlooks, which then develop into their views about the institution and ultimately frame students' opinion of the campus and their place within the campus environment.

According to Bean and Eaton (2000), a student who enrolls full-time at the same college each semester until they graduate is considered a retained student. When a student never returns to college before receiving a degree, the student is considered a dropout or leaver (Bean & Eaton, 2000). By the end of their freshman year, at least one fifth of students will drop out of college nationally (Gentry, 2014). Since 2013, the rate of enrollment and retention has declined, especially for students of color (Nichols et al., 2016). Carter (2006) maintained that the biggest challenge that institutional leaders will face is creating engaging incentives for minority college students to have access to college.

## **Review of the Broader Problem**

### ***Student Persistence***

According to Astin (1984), Nakajima (2008), McMahon (2018), and Zhou and Cole (2017), college student persistence is associated with students' involvement in college life. Astin (1984) went further and theorized that involvement means an investment of physical and psychological energy, occurrences along a continuum, and components of quantitative and qualitative. Hu (2011) pointed out that the activities that a student performs in-and out of class have an impact on the student's learning and

personal development along with what the student does to stay or persist in college. The study of student persistence has been popular and has been studied for over 50 years (Bjerke & Healy, 2010; Browning et al., 2018). Tinto defined the college dropout process as being the connections between the student, the academic, and the social system of the college as that of a longitudinal process (Thomas et al., 2014). Bjerke and Healy (2010) suggested that if a student does not persist at an institution, the impact is not only felt by the individual student, but the university will incur a loss, as well. Over one half of all students who enter college will leave the institution prematurely (Covarrubias et al., 2018; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

Factors related to student persistence must also be understood for student success and for institutional effectiveness (Bjerke & Healy, 2010). Research shows that when college students do not have precollege skills as a prerequisite before taking their college courses during their freshman year or before their sophomore year begins, many of the students will leave or drop out of college (Bettinger et al., 2013; Tinto, 1975). Astin (1975, 1993) determined that the level and quality of student interactions with their peers, faculty, and staff have an impact on both persistence and retention rates.

Titus (2004) noted that the factors contributing to college student persistence still needed be investigated despite greater accountability on the part of colleges and universities for retention and graduation rates (p. 673). Similarly, Mulroy (2008) found that there is little to no research that addresses how to improve student achievement and poor test scores for students at risk of leaving college before completion. Information



presented indicates the need for further research to understand how African American students can obtain the assistance they need to persist in higher education.

### ***Student Retention***

Student retention continues to be a major problem in higher education. Many studies exist that specifically discuss African American student retention (Lee, 2009; Marsh, 2014; Owolabi, 2018; Price, 2010); however, there is a limited research on how African American students perceive retention programs (Arendale, 2011). Astin's theory of student integration is the preferred conceptual framework used by researchers studying student retention (Arendale, 2011). Some of the major factors in college retention are high school GPA, college entrance exams, student demographics, and student academics. Swail et al. (2003) stated that much of the problem with student retention is that everything in the process is related to college persistence rates and college completion. The terms *student retention* and *student persistence* are used interchangeably (Rodgers, 2016). Both student retention and student persistence are related to students remaining in college. Student retention relates to institutional programs that help to allow the students to remain at the institution (Rodgers, 2016). Student persistence is related to determining if a student will continue or discontinue with their courses (Rodgers, 2016). Student retention differs from student persistence in that the programs do not guarantee that the students will be successful. Rodgers (2016) stated that students are expected to persist if they become socially and academically integrated into the institution or program.

Student retention has been a critical issue since the early 1970s for U.S. colleges and universities, resulting in the development and implementation of measures designed

to support the retention of students (Bettinger et al., 2013). Some of the measures used to determine the attainment of students are academic achievement, participation in college preparatory tests, and student-parent communications. Colleges also use institutional or state-level data to predict academic outcomes of minority students. Thompson et al. (2006) suggested that “these data are often used to evaluate trends in enrollment or graduation rates by university faculty and staff and can be useful in policy and decision making” (para. 7). Further, it seems that many students, regardless of being academically prepared, normally enter college unprepared for college-level work and need help adjusting to the overwhelming demands of a college environment (Bettinger et al., 2013). Engle and Theokas (2010) recognized that the reasons for students not being successful while in college are due to racial disparities. Typically, issues such as student attainment or retention are addressed during the freshman year at many colleges and universities (Bettinger et al., 2013).

Since 2010, due to the decrease in African American student enrollment and retention rates, questions have arisen, as to whether colleges and universities are investing substantial resources needed for programs designed to help students become successful and complete college (Gentry, 2014; Kimbark, 2015; Marsh, 2014; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Tinto, 2006). It was suggested by Gentry (2014), Kimbark (2015), and Tinto (2006) that the institutions invest in early college for students while they are in high school to help to place the students on a college-prep track. The college prep track would provide first-generational college students the opportunity to gain background information about the college. Along with knowledge, the student will learn problem-

solving skills, amongst other skills, they may not receive from their families because they are first generational college students (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016).

Students leave college for various reasons. Some of the reasons African American students may leave college are due to financial problems, family commitments, a change of major, and not fitting in (Bean, 1990; Kuh et al., 2008). Research has shown that institutional characteristics and culture have both indirect and direct effects on the student's propensity to become involved in both academic and non-academic activities (Braxton et al., 1995).

Aud et al. (2013) reported that the student retention rate at most HBCUs in 2012 was at 50% for full-time students. In 2015, VU retention rate was at 50% (VU Student Achievement Data, 2015). A report from the NCES (2018) showed that the first year to second-year retention rate for VU of 62% was among the worst in the nation, but comparable to most HBCUs. In 2018, the retention rate for the state was 75%, and the retention rate nationwide was slightly lower at 73.8%. Data displayed in Table 1 indicate that VU has one of the lowest retention rates of most HBCUs in the state.

**Table 1**

*2017-2018 Tennessee HBCU First- to Second-Year Retention Rate*

University	First-year retention rate (%), full-time students
Lane	60
Victory University	62
Fisk University	81
Tennessee State University	64
State average	75
National average (all institutions)	73.8

*Note.* Information obtained from NCES (2018).

### *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*

There has been considerable research on HBCUs over the past 30 years (Gasman & Commodore, 2014). However, this body of research still has substantial gaps. Research to address these gaps may provide insight on the impact of HBCU that leaders can use to bolster these institutions and the learning opportunities they afford students (Gasman & Commodore, 2014). Before 1964, the principal mission of HBCUs was to educate African Americans because African Americans were denied admissions to traditionally White institutions (Cantey et al., 2013; Crawford, 2017; Elliott et al., 2019; Fryer & Greenston, 2010; Harper, 2019; Hilton & Felder, 2014; Lynch, 2014; McEachern, 2011; Montgomery & Montgomery, 2012). As a result, HBCUs became the primary means of providing post-secondary education to African Americans from 1837 until 1977 (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2018). HBCUs are committed to providing opportunities for students who normally come from low-income households, are first-generational, or disabled (Gasman, 2013; Mercer & Stedman, 2008), but still targeting African American students.

HBCUs were established to help meet the educational needs of Black Americans because they were denied access to White institutions (Gasman, 2013; Harper, 2019; Lynch, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Though HBCUs' initial mission may have changed, the institutions are a reminder that all Americans have an inalienable right to education. U.S. college and university systems will still need HBCUs (Lynch, 2014). Brown and Davis (2001) stated that HBCU became the principal means of getting a post-secondary education to Black Americans. Currently, there are approximately 105

HBCUs, of which 51 are public institutions and 56 private, not-for-profit institutions (NCES, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). During much of the African American student college experience, HBCUs have helped students obtain their equality and dignity (Crewe, 2017).

Many of the HBCUs are in the southern and border states (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2018). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is the primary regional accreditor (Crawford, 2017). The NCES (2018) reported that student enrollment at HBCUs increased 47% between 1976 and 2010. This represented a national student enrollment of 223,000 to 326,600 (NCES, 2018). According to Harper (2019), 13% of African Americans are enrolled in HBCUs, and this represents approximately 22% of African American college students receiving bachelor's degrees. Nguyen et al. (2019) reported that today, HBCUs represent only 3% of the colleges in the nation.

### ***Student Engagement***

One of the major indicators of student persistence is student engagement. Student engagement is one key component in helping to address student persistence or student dropout rate (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Tinto, 2017a). Student engagement indicates how much involvement and enthusiasm that the students place in earning their academically focused accomplishments (Kuh et al., 2008). Student engagement is also an indicator of the time and energy a student devotes to activities related to their education purpose (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008).

In education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they must learn and progress in their education. ("Student Engagement", 2016)

Some studies show students who usually persist do not engage with students who leave college prematurely (Kuh et al., 2008). Research indicates that student engagement does have an impact on academic outcomes and persistence (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kuh et al., 2008; Tinto, 2017a).

Student engagement is also an excellent outcome predictor on determining if students are experiencing increased learning and personal growth or development (Carini et al., 2006). Student engagement allows students to have a better college experience (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Also, students who are more involved in the college environment become better learners. If a student is uninvolved, they might neglect their studies and may not interact with the faculty members or other students. Research has shown that a lack of student engagement has an impact on students leaving college early. Lawson and Lawson (2013) reported that Tinto (2004) indicated that undergraduate students depart earlier from school due to them not connecting or feeling comfortable with their peers, faculty, and staff. Some researchers view student engagement as what happens within the college classroom or within the walls of the school. The conclusion is based on students' academic engagement, along with classroom engagement at their college (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Engstrom and Tinto (2008) and Tinto (2004) asserted that students need curriculums that provide academic assistance and developmental education programs that help the students to learn and understand their curriculum. The institution should encourage students to interact with their peers and faculty, as they are important members of their institution. The goal of the curriculum should be to authenticate the students' participation in the academic life of the college or university. If not corrected, this problem will have a negative impact on improving student retention.

### ***Faculty/Staff Member Engagement***

The students and the faculty and staff play an important role at every college and university (Crisp et al., 2017; Romsa et al., 2017). Higher education institutions must involve all stakeholders when improving the students' experiences while attending their institutions. Student engagement with faculty and staff members is important to student persistence and retention (Aydin, 2017; Chen et al., 2014). Students will be able to understand what the instructors are expecting from them, and the instructor will be able to provide a learning environment that will enhance the study skills of the students (Voigt & Hundrieser, 2008). Students who are well-informed on academic expectations can interact and engage freely with their instructors so that they can complete their educational works (Feldman, 1994; Rendón et al., 2000). To improve the teacher-student relationship and communication, faculty and staff members should commit to actively engaging their students in educational endeavors that allow them to feel a part of the campus. Building a culture of community may lead to an increase in students taking ownership of their learning and accepting the responsibility for staying at the institution.

### ***First-Generation Students***

First-generation students are defined as students whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree (Schwartz et al., 2018; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). These students are the first in their family to attend a 4-year college/university to obtain a bachelor's degree (Schwartz et al., 2018). They are usually from low-income backgrounds, and primarily from African American and Hispanic households (Tucker, 2014). In 2015-2016, first-generation students comprised 56% of the students who attended college in the United States (RTI International, 2019).

Scholars have found that first-generation students do not persist and graduate at the same rate as their peers with parents who are college-educated (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Opposed to students with parents who attended postsecondary schools, first-generation students are less selective when it comes to picking a post-secondary education (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dyce, 2015). Currently, 60% of first-time, full-time students who enter a 4-year institution graduate within six years (Kena et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2018). The percentage is significantly lower for first-generation students from low-income families. Only about 10% of low-income first-generation students graduate within 6 years (Education Advisory Board, 2019).

Although many first-generation students are emotionally encouraged by their family, in many cases, they do not have a mentor or someone helping them to prepare for college or get information on college preparation (Tucker, 2014). Research supports the notion that mentoring, and coaching are vital to the outcome of first-generation students, who lack family members who can help them navigate through college life. Students who



are considered first-generation students normally will experience higher isolation on campus (Jehangir, 2010). The results of the Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey (2018) showed 15% of first-generation graduates reported receiving zero support from their college faculty and staff. Despite this, many of the same students reported witnessing a high rate of positive social interaction between peers.

When it comes to engaging first-generation students in their academic pursuit, they face more challenges than their-non-first-generation peers because they do not have the same levels of social capital. Social capital is vital to all students as they adapt to college (Bourdieu, 1986). Maintaining the appropriate social networks provides students access to institutional resources and information that contributes to student success (Almeida et al., 2019; Bourdieu, 1986; Pascarella et al., 2004; Soria et al., 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Some scholars rely on the social capital framework of Bourdieu when they explore the differences between first-generation students and students from privileged backgrounds (O'Brien & Ó Fathaigh, 2005). “Bourdieu’s theory offers socio-cultural explanations for why under-represented groups remain excluded from the educational process” (O’Brien & Ó Fathaigh, 2005, p. 68). In his theory, Bourdieu alluded to cultural barriers as having an impact on students’ participation in college, along with their lived experiences. Social capital can predict the academic outcome and help to prevent students from dropping out of college (Shahidul et al., 2015). Based on Bourdieu’s theory, because the parents of first-generation students have not earned a college degree, the students most likely will not be successful in higher education because they lack the social capital (Gofen, 2009; Hutchison, 2017). Many first-

generation students receive little or no assistance from their families because they lack the understanding about navigating the college system (Tucker, 2014). Hutchison (2017) found that family support is an important factor for first-generation students being successful in college. However, family members usually experience difficulties with the financial aid process, securing housing, as well as other issues related to the college admissions process that can hinder student success.

Without support programs, many African American first-generation students depart from college early without receiving their degrees (Jehangir, 2010). Many colleges and universities have developed strategies and methods to assist first-generation students (Tucker, 2014). One method is the peer-to-peer program. Peer-to-peer programs are a type of mentoring between first-generation students with similar backgrounds and shared experiences to help their peers, both academically and socially (Plaskett et al., 2018; Tucker, 2014). Astin (1993) believed that student peer groups had a positive influence on how students would perform during their undergraduate years. These efforts collectively aim to provide students with the necessary tools to successfully meet the challenges associated with the college experience. Some of first-generation students' academic preparation and financial constraints are challenges that cause the students to depart from college early (Jehangir, 2010).

Once African American first-generation students attend college, they carry the hopes of their families and communities along with their hopes (Jehangir, 2010). The students normally will determine their major or career path in college by what the families and community assume for them. Limited guidance is provided to the students,

as it relates to their expected career goals because many of them do not have an educational or college background.

### ***Programs and Courses That Assist First-Year Students***

There are numerous programs or courses designed to assist first-year college students. Much literature and research on freshman seminar courses or first-year experience (FYE) have helped educators to build a solid foundation for designing courses (Taylor-Mendoza, 2010) and helping students to persist while attending college. FYE is one of the widely used retention tools. The FYE course was “specifically designed to equip new students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are necessary to meet the different transitional and developmental challenges successfully” that are encountered during their first year in college (Permzadian & Credé, 2016). In the beginning, FYE courses were orientation programs for first-year students; however, over the years, the goal of the program changed to helping to increase student retention (Everett, 2013). The focus of research on FYE was on students succeeding or persisting while in college. Tinto (2006) stated that the first year is critical because it will determine if the student will remain in college.

One of the purposes of the FYE program was to help to serve the academic needs of under-prepared and low-income students (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015; Van der Zanden et al., 2018). Another purpose of the FYE was to give students a foundation needed for college completion. Studies also helped to show the challenges new students have in transitioning to college life (Everett, 2013). Some of the challenges were that the students did not have the knowledge and skills needed to overcome obstacles associated

with attending college, along with not being able to afford cost of college. When students participate in FYE courses, they often will improve their retention because of their commitment to perform their studies (Erickson & Stone, 2012). The commitment helps the students to persist to their second year and improve their academic performance.

The University of South Carolina [USC] (n.d.), headed by President Thomas Jones, was the first college to have an FYE program. The course was called University 101. President Jones created the courses during the May 1970 protests and riots as a strategy to encourage students to persist. President Jones' goal was to create a program that allowed the students to bond with the institution and have an influence on how they taught the students (USC, n.d.). Taylor-Mendoza (2010) stated that FYE programs also help to introduce incoming first-year students to the strictness and rewards of a college or university. FYE programs are also effective in helping to improve students' motivation to learn, along with their academic and personal success (Gordon & Foutz, 2015; Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015).

In 1987, John Gardner and his colleagues at USC created the National Resource Center for The Study of the Freshman Year Experience (Gardner et al., 2001). The purpose of the National Resource Center was to improve undergraduate learning and retention at institutional, regional, and national levels. Gardner and his colleagues also created the Policy Center on the First Year of College in 1999. The Policy Center helped to provide information on how campuses must concentrate on students' involvement with their courses and instructors during the first-year college. If they do not, the campuses will have a problem with students remaining in college (Gardner et al., 2001). Also, the

Policy Center needs to keep up with what is considered the reality of the FYE to make sure that it can assist the students in persisting while they are attending college.

In 2015 at least 94% of U.S. colleges had implemented freshman seminars (Gordon & Foutz, 2015). An estimated 40% of the students who attend a 2-year college would take FYE courses while 30% of 4-year college students will take the courses (What Works Clearinghouse, 2016). Approximately 525 of 4-year institutions required first-year students to take FYE courses (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015). FYE courses are remedial courses for students who are academically underprepared and sometimes for students who may be in a specific major. Some of the students must take remedial courses to become successful while attending college (Bettinger et al., 2013).

### ***Socioeconomic Status***

President Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1964 “Great Society” speech said, “poverty must not be a bar to learning, and learning must offer an escape from poverty” (Johnson, 1964, para. 20). President Johnson was saying that one’s economic status should not define what one can become; however, if one receives the proper education, they can succeed. According to Cahalan et al. (2018), 73% of the students identified as having a socioeconomic status (SES) in the upper-income level completed their degrees. In comparison, 12% of the students at the bottom of the low-income quartile did not graduate from college (Kimbrough, 2011). Families whose income is below the federal poverty level represent the poor or low-income families (Cahalan et al., 2018; DeNavas-Walt, & Proctor, 2015; Simms et al., 2009). Kimbrough’s (2011) research supports the

notion that minority students are at risk of dropping out within the first year of college because of their SES.

Graduation data continue to show inconsistencies in HBCU students' degree completion rates and degree completion rates of students attending PWIs (Stewart et al., 2015). Most research related to African American students' college experience and persistence based on SES has compared them with their White counterparts at PWIs (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dyce, 2015). There is an absence of research that explores the SES of African American students in HBCUs (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dyce, 2015). Longmire-Avital and Miller-Dyce (2015) recognized that differences exist in how HBCU students conceptualize and identify their family's socioeconomic class. The authors declared that there should be a better understanding to determine if there is a connection between student achievement and SES (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dyce, 2015). A student's SES is usually not visible until the student reveals information on his or her background, such as their parent's education or occupation, high school, and other information (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dyce, 2015).

Kimbrough (2011) suggested that SES and persistence are some of the factors that help to contribute toward the lack of college success. There is still a gap between low-income students and students within other income levels because low-income students may still lack the ability to pay for the cost of college. The condition is due to many African American students and minority students normally not having access to critical resources or information that help them to achieve actual education orientation and plans (Tekleselassie et al., 2013). Whaley and Noel (2011) found that research that

concentrated on the problems about the African American culture would provide a better understanding of African Americans and how to increase their retention. When the students do not have the monies to finance attending college, research also showed student persistence would be negatively impacted (Whaley & Noel, 2011).

### *Academic Self-Efficacy*

Self-efficacy concerns how one executes or performs a particular task or behavior successfully (Fife et al., 2011; Peguero & Shaffer, 2015; Tinto, 2017b). Social psychologist Bandura (1993) viewed self-efficacy as the way individuals think, along with how they motivate themselves and behave. Other researchers suggested that the most effective way to measure academic self-efficacy is by one's academic performance (Dickinson et al., 2017; Peguero & Shaffer, 2015); Sutter & Paulson, 2016). This aspect is vital because self-efficacy reflects an individual's beliefs aligned with one's behavior and how they may accomplish his or her tasks (Bandura, 1993).

As it relates to persistence and academic outcome, Thomas et al. (2009) described self-efficacy as "the most effective measure of the self when examining academic adjustment because of the focus on task competency" (p. 161). DeWitz et al. (2009) suggested that self-efficacy helps to explain why African American students persist despite the many barriers they face, including institutional racism and sexism. Okech and Harrington (2002) proposed that academic self-efficacy is a factor that helps in determining how a student will succeed in performing his or her academic achievements. Self-efficacy correlates with students' interest and the encouragement they receive from faculty. "The notion of academic efficacy refers to the belief that one can and will meet

the demands of one's academic environment” (Fife et al., 2011). The students’ belief in their accomplishments will have an impact on their completing their courses. Research has shown that students control their ability to remain or stay at a college (DeWitz et al., 2009). Students determine whether they are willing to complete the work needed to remain in college. Further, students with high self-efficacy can persist through their academic trials and get the resources needed for them to succeed (Bandura, 1993). DeWitz et al. (2009) stated that the use of or recognition of the theory might help guide personnel in its effort to increase the retention and work performed by the students by creating an intervention. Arroyo and Gasman (2014) pointed out that literature on HBCUs has developed for many years. Some of the research focuses on the underachievement of the students. Arroyo and Gasman (2014) stated that, “Black student success represents one of the more pressing issues of today” (p. 59). Additional research is needed on the topic to assist researchers in better understanding what motivates the African American students to persist and the institutional components, if any, that facilitate success.

### ***Student Support Services***

Grant-Vallone et al. (2003) found that students who participate in student support services at their college or university will maintain a higher retention rate than students who do not participate in these types of programs. Student support services provides resources to assist underrepresented (low-income, minority, and first-generation) students. Students have access to programs that will help them achieve academically and become successful, while they receive their postsecondary education. Student support



services help students to persist at either 2-year or 4-year colleges (Dortch, 2016; Engle et al., 2008).

Underprepared students require various student support services that will support their efforts to achieve academically (Wilmer, 2008). The author further contended that student support services helps the students to improve their skills to perform their college-level coursework (Wilmer, 2008). The types of services provided to students are instruction in basic skills, tutoring, mentoring, academic advising, financial aid, and career counseling. Student support services are also valuable in helping to increase the enrollment of students and are one of several TRIO offerings. The TRIO Program is offered to help assist first-generation, low-income, or disabled college students (Dortch, 2016; Engle et al., 2008). Researchers have studied the impact of utilizing student support services on student retention, social adjustment, and students' academic level (Dortch, 2016; Grant-Vallone et al., 2003). They have found that use of these services helps the students to become successful in their academic studies. Although past research has shown that student support programs help to increase retention or student success, there remains little research that provides cogent evidence that the students overall are benefitting from the interventions (Richburg-Hayes, 2015). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), faculty is not engaging enough with the students; due to this, students are not encouraged to place more time in their classroom work (Kuh, 2003). In many cases, colleges or universities are not creating outcome indicators that can be used to report data on student support services. There should be a knowledge base created that provides effective best practice for student support services (Richburg-Hayes, 2015).

This study could be used as a guide to assist institutions that need to improve their student support services programs.

### **Implications**

Low persistence and degree completion rates at HBCUs require a broad range of responses from colleges and universities to address the issue. A review of the literature revealed that institutional support might be an effective strategy for promoting student success (Stewart et al., 2015). The results from my study can contribute to providing recommendations to assist VU administrators in creating a potential training plan for the faculty on how to support students, so they persist. Discovering what helps students to persist and developing the appropriate support strategies can assist VU in addressing student persistence. If more institutions implement programs that increase student persistence, it will aid in increasing the number of African Americans or students retained in college (College Board Advocacy, 2009). The implications of this study have the potential to affect prospective and current college students by utilizing the perceptions and experiences of at-risk freshmen about attending VU and by developing a project plan that can contribute to improving student persistence. The study can also help African American students in completing their degrees to be better prepared to take on leadership roles and responsibilities within their community and beyond.

### **Summary**

The focus of Section 1 was to define the local problem. VU was experiencing a problem with student persistence, as well as its retention rates. Data showed that the current student retention rate after the freshman year was at 63% while the rate for part-

time students was at 50%. The backgrounds of students attending HBCUs are first-generation students, who are low-income and usually need Pell Grant assistance. Students are required to attend FYE courses to help meet the academic needs of students transitioning to college. The FYE also helps students become college-ready so they can complete their courses at VU and earn their degree.

Currently, VU has no effective program of study that encourages student engagement with faculty and staff. A study could be used to investigate the need for VU to increase student engagement and interaction with faculty to help students persist while at VU. Along with participants' perceptions and experiences of attending an HBCU, I examined the body of educational research that exist in support programs provided by VU that are used to increase African American student persistence and degree completion.

The literature review contains evidence-based research related to student persistence of African American students in higher education. I used Tinto's student integration model (1975, 1993) and Bean's causal model of student attrition (1980, 1982) for the conceptual framework. The research question guided the investigation of African American students' perceptions who persisted at VU and thereby identified factors that influenced the students' decision to remain in school. In Section 2, I describe the methodology that I used to explore the research problem of this basic qualitative study. I included the methods used to recruit participants based on the eligibility criteria and a detailed description of the demographics of the study site. I also discussed the data collection and data analysis procedures. In basic qualitative research, the goal is to

provide an in-depth description of the experiences of the participants (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The data analysis is a summary of the interview data collected in the study. After completing the research, an appropriate genre was determined for the project. In Section 3, I include a detailed description of the project and a review of the literature that was developed from the findings. The completed doctoral project can be found in Appendix A. In Section 4, I provide a reflective analysis of the study. Topics discussed included an evaluation of the project strengths in addressing the problem and recommendations for remediation of the limitations, as well as implications for the study to create social change.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Qualitative Research Design and Approach**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to learn what factors influence an at-risk freshman student's decision to persist or leave college so that interventions can be proposed to improve student retention. The study allowed the participating freshman students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences during their first year in college. This study adds to the body of knowledge on strategies that administrators and staff at HBCUs can use to retain students and assist students in achieving their academic goals.

#### **Qualitative Approach**

I used a basic qualitative design to examine the perceptions of African American freshmen currently enrolled at VU on the factors that influenced them to persist at the private HBCU. Qualitative research is an approach used to explore a phenomenon or problem (Creswell, 2012a; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By using qualitative research, I was able to obtain a detailed understanding of the study problem or phenomenon. Participants were encouraged to share details about their experiences regarding persistence freely. Qualitative research, as suggested by Patton (2005), allows for a reasonable inquiry that provides a real-world setting to provide narrative rich in its description. Campbell (2014) stated that qualitative research data are based on an individual perspective. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that qualitative researchers seek to understand how people make sense of their experiences and allows for a more in-depth exploration of the problem.

Qualitative research designs include grounded theory, narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, and case study approaches (Creswell, 2012b). Another is the basic qualitative design, which I used for this study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the basic qualitative design is described as qualitative “without declaring it a particular type of qualitative study” (p. 23). Being able to discover and interpret participants’ meanings is what distinguishes a basic qualitative design from other qualitative approaches (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By using the basic qualitative design, I was able to elicit participants’ perspectives on their personal experiences with persisting while attending VU. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outlined four characteristics of a basic qualitative design that I incorporated in this study: (a) the researcher focuses on understanding, (b) the researcher is the primary instrument, (c) the researcher uses an inductive process, and (d) the researcher aims to gather rich descriptions.

### **Other Research Approaches**

I did not utilize a quantitative research approach. Queirós et al. (2017) pointed out that in quantitative research, measurable data are obtained objectively and analyzed through statistical procedures, whereas qualitative research is concerned with understanding a given problem to produce in-depth and illustrative information about the problem. I aimed to understand and interpret student persistence or why students remain at VU. A quantitative design allows the testing of hypotheses or assumptions regarding a study along with the ability to make predictions (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Lichtman, 2006). For this study, there was no reason to perform inquiries on trends and to explain the relationships of variables. A mixed-method approach would not be

appropriate for this study. Creswell (2012a) stated that a mixed-method approach provides a better understanding of the research problem by combining both quantitative and qualitative data types. The interview data were not measurable, and therefore could not be analyzed with a quantitative statistical test.

I established credibility by gathering detailed descriptions about participants' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions about persistence at the study site, by using member checking, and through my interpretation of the interview data (Kornbluh, 2015; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Carlson (2010) stated that member checking provides a level of authenticity to the qualitative instrument and validity to the participants' data. Qualitative research provides an approach to discovering and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using a basic qualitative design for the study allows researchers to collect data using open-ended questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Lichtman, 2006). The basic qualitative design required me to set aside any personal biases and allowed the participants an opportunity to articulate first-hand their experiences with persisting at VU. For the member checking, participants were given the opportunity to clarify what their intentions were, correct any inconsistencies, and provide additional information if necessary, which contributed to the accuracy of my interpretation of the interview data (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

## Participants

### Setting and Sample

The setting for the study was a private urban 4-year liberal arts, coeducational HBCU located in the Southeastern region of the United States. VU earned accreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges to award the associate and baccalaureate degrees. The university has a 100% admissions rate. As of Spring 2018, fewer than 1,000 students attend the university. The student population consisted of 33% male and 67% female students (NCES, 2018). African American students represented 98% of the student population (NCES, 2018). To attend VU, many of the students receive a federal grant or subsidy. VU has a 13:1 student-faculty ratio, with over 70% of the classes containing fewer than 20 students.

VU aims to be an HBCU of excellence that impacts the lives of students, communities, and other institutions, according to the institution's 2019 undergraduate catalog. It maintains a commitment to developing educated lifelong learners who will be agents of change, the catalog noted. Despite VU's vision and mission, the university ranks in the bottom 25% of all HBCUs and in the bottom 5% in alumni gifts and donations, according to the *U.S. News & World Report (Colleges: 2020-21, 2021)*.

During the time of this study, the world was contending with COVID-19. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020a), COVID-19 stemmed from a new coronavirus first identified in China in December 2019. Sheposh (2021) stated that the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 prompted the World Health Organization to issue a public health emergency of international concern and declare a



global pandemic. Many people contracted the virus, and that unfortunately resulted in many hospitalizations and deaths. Documented inequities related to health care put ethnic minority groups such as African Americans at increased risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19 at higher rates (CDC, 2020b). Ray (2021) asserted that some minority groups are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19. As of June 2021, the United States reported almost 600,000 deaths and over 33 million cases of COVID-19 (CDC, n.d.). Worldwide, the death toll is above 3.7 million and over 174 million cases reported, as of June 2021 (NPR, n.d.). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021), vaccines began to be distributed and administered in the United States in December 2020.

The pandemic interrupted synchronous instruction at many U.S. colleges and universities. The 2020-21 school year was the first time VU students attended all classes virtually. The university provided students a personal laptop, some with internet access, and instruction on navigating Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams was their platform for participating in classes and tutoring sessions, communicating with instructors and peers, and accessing other resources.

I used a purposeful sampling strategy to select participants for the study. As stated by Creswell (2012a), purposeful sampling allows researchers to select participants intentionally. Patton (1999) stated that “purposeful sampling selects information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 169). Criterion sampling was the strategy used to perform purposeful sampling in this study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) stated that purposeful sampling allows a researcher to select participants based on

a specific criterion. Criterion sampling allows for the participants to be predetermined. A relatively small number of participants are required for purposeful sampling because the participants may have had similar experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

After I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals from both Walden University and VU, I used purposeful sampling to select 12 participants for the study. VU's institutional research department provided me a pool of over 100 potential students who were admitted and enrolled in Fall 2020 and who met the eligibility criteria for the study. The study sample consisted of 12 participants. Participant eligibility criteria included the following factors: (a) participants be first-time freshmen students enrolled at the study site, (b) be 18 years or older to avoid the need for parental approval, (c) be African American, and (d) had a high school GPA of 2.0-2.5 at the time of enrolling at VU.

To establish a researcher-participant working relationship, I ensured that participants had a complete understanding of the study process (see Walsh, 2014). Developing rapport encourages the participants to be honest as they share their experiences (Creswell, 2012b). I had no connection with the study site, and therefore no supervisory responsibilities over the participants. No coercion or undue influence occurred. Once the participants sent back the consent forms electronically as instructed, ideally, they would have been able to schedule their interviews, follow-ups, and member checking meeting. However, the unprecedented times caused by COVID-19 created phenomenal changes in our daily lives. Worldwide restrictions limited activities and physical interactions to prevent the spread of the virus (Scala et al., 2020; Vindrola-

Padros et al., 2020). Ethical considerations took priority when recruiting participants and conducting interviews. I used email as the primary source for communicating with VU representatives and student participants. I conducted interviews by phone to protect the health and well-being of the participants. Phone interviews allowed participants to convey their experiences about VU and provided insight into how they were able to persist and succeed.

### **Methods for Protection of Participants Rights**

Ethical standards must be considered when conducting research involving human participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The standards in the *Belmont Report* lay the foundation for the IRB procedures: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). To protect the rights of participants in the study, I first sought approval from the Walden University IRB to conduct the study. The Walden IRB ensures that all research complies with the university's ethical standards and principles. The collection of any data requires IRB approval (Walden University, 2018). The Walden approval number for this study is 08-11-20-0316832. After obtaining Walden IRB approval, I took the proper steps to adhere to university and local site procedures to gain access to prospective participants to collect interview data. The VU Office of Institutional Research requested proof of university IRB approval. I also submitted a proposal that included the interview protocol, measures taken to protect the participants, selection criteria for participants, and the purpose of the study, as stated by the institutional research director. After the

documents were approved, I obtained a letter of cooperation to confirm partner approval with VU.

The consent process provided prospective participants information about the study. Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, interview procedures, the minimal risks they may be exposed to, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants who accepted the invitation to be a part of the study were instructed to return the consent form electronically. I orally disclosed the expectations and rules of confidentiality to each participant who took part in the study. Any questions that the participants had about the study or their participation were answered. It was necessary to record participants' name to keep organized and accurate research records and for member checking after data collection. However, I took steps to protect the privacy of the participants identity. Participants' names, as well as any identifiers that connected the participants to the study site, were not displayed or listed in the research. All documentation related to the participants was assigned an alphanumeric code. For confidentiality, participant names were replaced with an assigned code such as SP1, SP2, SP3 and continuing in that manner until each participant had a corresponding code. I was the only one to know each participant's name and matching code.

### **Data Collection**

Merriam and Grenier (2019) referred to basic qualitative research data as consisting of how individuals interpret their experiences. Creswell (2012a) noted that essences are core meanings evolving from shared experiences. A single site was selected for the study. The data provided a realistic view of participants' perceptions of their

experiences with persistence at VU. To recruit participants, I sent an email to current freshmen at the local site to participate in the study.

### **Interviews**

I collected data through semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews contain a “well thought out set of questions; however, the questions may take an open forum, and the researcher may vary the order in which topics are considered” (Kelley et al., 2003, p. 263). The interview format allowed consistency in the interview questions asked of the participants. Creswell (2012a) advocated that using the interview format contributes to validity in collecting information from all the interviewees. Turner (2010) suggested that being in a comfortable environment while interviewing the participants will make it easier to respond and elaborate on the interview questions.

VU offered only remote learning for the 2020-2021 school year. Social distancing and other safety restrictions prevented interviews from being conducted face-to-face. Electronic communication provided the best option for data collection because of COVID-19. As an alternative, I used internet video conferencing applications such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom and the telephone to conduct the interviews and recorded over the phone using a telephone application.

Advances in digital technology make alternative formats for qualitative data collection worth exploring (Abrams et al., 2015; Archibald et al., 2019). According to Archibald et al. (2019) and Lo Iacono et al. (2016), video conferencing provides similar features to face-to-face interviews because interviews can be conducted in real-time and allow for visual and audio interaction with participants. Abrams et al. (2015) suggested

the use of email for conducting interviews, and Holt (2010) recognized the use of the phone. The authors considered the use of email and phone as viable methods for data collection.

Although central questions underpinned the interviews, I used prompts and follow-up questions during each interview to capture the detailed description of the perception of the participant. The interview questions were designed to generate information on why participants persisted at VU (see Appendix B). The open-ended interview questions and the semistructured format provided the platform for participants to provide details about their experiences (Turner, 2010). When appropriate, the follow-up questions were used to obtain further information during the interview (Chenail, 2011).

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The participants conducted member checking after I completed the preliminary findings of the research. I provided a transcribed copy of each participant's responses to them by email to make corrections or edits, as needed. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no compensation was provided.

### **Interview Protocol**

I used an interview protocol as a guide for each interview (see Appendix C). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended interview questions and provided the procedures, instructions, and a script to be used during the interview process (Creswell, 2012a). The script included the prompts that allowed the interviewer to inquire further about the information that was needed for the data collection (Creswell, 2012a).

### **Systems for Keeping Track of Data**

During the interviews, I adhered closely to the interview protocol. To prevent contaminating the data, I avoided restating the participants' responses. I kept a reflective journal to document my thoughts and opinions of the research experience. According to Lamb (2013), reflection involves creating and clarifying the meaning of the research experience in terms of self. Keeping a reflective journal helped me structure my thoughts and opinions about each interview session. Ortlipp (2008) pointed out that recording ideas about the research adds a level of transparency to the process that can be helpful during data analysis.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by me. The digital interview recordings, interview transcripts, and flash drives used to store study information were kept in my home in a fire-proof file cabinet requiring a key for entry. All forms of data will remain stored for the minimum 5-year Walden University IRB requirement. After 5 years, according to the Walden University IRB requirement, all stored materials will be destroyed.

### **Gaining Access to Participants**

After obtaining IRB approval from Walden University, a data file request was made to VU to secure potential participants meeting the specified criteria. The VU Office of Institutional Research approved the criteria for selecting participants and provided participant contact information. The VU Dean of Students' office and the Information Technology (IT) staff worked with the Office of Institutional Research in retrieving the participant names and contact information.

The number of participants selected from the data file was doubled to allow for those who may not accept the invitation to participate in the study. I initially selected 20 potential freshmen students from the report that met the research eligibility criteria. Initial contact with the 20 potential participants was by email. A letter of invitation was emailed to the potential participants requesting their participation in the study. As a follow-up to the initial invitation, I contacted the potential participants after five business days. Because of COVID-19 and the on-campus structure no longer being utilized, I had to retry getting the students using additional potential students until I went through over 100 eligible prospects to obtain the 12 students needed for my data collection. Email communication was used as a follow-up method to confirm participation. If the initial participants canceled their participation, the backup participants were invited to participate until saturation was reached. The final sample consisted of 12 African American freshmen made up of 5 males and 7 females. Participants were admitted and enrolled soon after high school at VU as traditional students between the ages of 18 and 20. Sixty-six percent were first-generation college students and 75%, if they persist through to graduation, will be the first in their family to complete a bachelor's degree (see Table 2).



**Table 2***Participant Characteristics*

Participant Code	Gender	First-generation student	Will be first to complete undergraduate degree
SP-01	Male	No	No
SP-02	Female	No	Yes
SP-03	Male	Yes	Yes
SP-04	Female	Yes	Yes
SP-05	Female	Yes	Yes
SP-06	Male	Yes	Yes
SP-07	Male	No	No
SP-08	Female	Yes	Yes
SP-09	Female	Yes	Yes
SP-10	Female	No	No
SP-11	Female	Yes	Yes
SP-12	Male	Yes	Yes

**Role of the Researcher**

The researcher in a qualitative case study is the main instrument for data collection and analysis. Interviewing is utilized as one of the major means to gather data for qualitative research studies (Chenail, 2011). Chenail (2011) asserted that the interview process allows the researcher to become the instrument that helps collect and generate the data. For this study, I conduct semistructured interviews that allowed me to observe the participants to judge the sincerity or naturalness of their knowledge, experiences, and attitudes (Patton, 2005). During the interview process, follow-up and probing questions were asked to receive clarification when needed. I had no past or current relationship with VU or the students attending VU. Although I am African American, I did not attend an HBCU but rather a PWI. I maintained objectivity and

avoided personal bias, such as being a first-generation college student and living in a predominately Black community while in high school. I had the participants review the results to confirm that my interpretations were representative of their beliefs.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is used to develop and determine the findings of research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Transcripts are the written account of the data collected from the interviews. Creswell (2012a) implied that a written transcript allows the researcher to accurately quote the interviewee in the findings. At the conclusion of each interview, I transcribed the recorded data verbatim using a separate word document for each participant interview. Manual transcription was used to convert the audio recordings into text data for analysis. This allowed me to take accurate notes from the participants' responses which provided better context for the findings. The transcriptions were then examined for data discrepancies. I planned to explain any conflicting information if inconsistent patterns were found (Creswell, 2013). I transcribed the data within 3 days of each scheduled interview. In addition, I used a journal to make sure I did not miss any participants responses during the interviews.

Creswell's six-step process was used to analyze the data (Creswell, 2013). The six steps included: (a) organizing the data to prepare for analysis, (b) reading through all the data, (c) coding the data by hand or computer, (d) determining themes and descriptions, (e) interrelating themes and descriptions, and (f) interpreting the meaning of themes and descriptions (Creswell, 2013). The steps provided guidance and helped in validating the accuracy of the data gathered. The coding process involved labeling, summarizing, and

organizing the data so that the information could be interpreted correctly (Lodico et al., 2010). The information gained in the coding process was broken down into descriptive categories. The information from the categories was used to compare the similarities, differences, and uniqueness of the data provided by the participants. The emergent themes contributed to an understanding of the students' perceptions of why they persisted at VU.

### **Evidence of Quality**

The credibility of this qualitative inquiry was established through member checking. Harper and Cole (2012) maintained that member checking helps provide authenticity and accuracy, to the participants' interview data (Harper & Cole, 2012). I conducted the member checking by providing each participant, through e-mail, a copy of their responses and a brief interpretation of findings generated from their statements. The participants could verify through phone, email, or video conference the accuracy of their responses within three to four weeks after the initial interview and transcribing of the data. Participants that did not respond to the initial email, I contacted via a follow-up phone call. Creswell (2012b) acknowledged that a study has credibility when the students believe their viewpoints are represented truthfully and the report is credible to them. Member checking contributed to avoiding or eliminating incorrect or misinterpretations of the data (Creswell, 2012b; Moustakas, 1994). Member checking also helps address discrepant cases (Creswell, 2012b).

Discrepant cases are when the participants' responses do not align with each other. During the data analysis, I looked for evidence of discrepant cases. Merriam and

Tisdell (2016) stated that discrepant cases are data that may challenge the projected results. Rose and Johnson (2020) acknowledged that when researchers present negative cases that both support and contradict developing perspectives, it increases the validity of the findings made through their research. I reread the verbatim transcriptions from the interviews. I examined the data and search for examples that run counter to emergent themes. During the search, I did not locate inconsistent responses that conflicted with my study.

Peer debriefing was used to validate the interview data. The peer reviewer was an educator who had experience working at an HBCU as both a professor and an executive staff member. However, the reviewer was not involved in the research study. Rose and Johnson (2020) suggested that the debriefer could assist by questioning methodological practices, data collection and analysis techniques, and examine the overall clarity of the research. Creswell (2012b) acknowledged that validating the data ensures that the information provided in a qualitative report is accurate. I reviewed the feedback to determine if the emerged themes aligned with the data collected. The educator confirmed that the information provided in the study was both accurate and valid.

Verifying reference sources also contributed to providing credibility to the study. I tagged the references with the digital object identifier (DOI). If I could not find the DOI, I used the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) reference number. For references that did not have a DOI or ERIC reference number, I included the uniform resource locator (URL) when available.

## Data Analysis Results

The burdens placed on the nation by the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the data collection and data analysis process. Concerns ranged from recruiting participants, given that students were not attending classes on campus, to access to participants. Another issue was requesting time for participants to be interviewed and do a member check, all while unexpectedly working to navigate their first year of college remotely. The intended method for gathering data was through Microsoft Teams and Zoom. However, during the first interview, I experienced several connection problems, such as network latency, inadequate quality audio, and frozen screen, to name a few. I abandoned the use of video conferencing to conduct the remaining 11 interviews by phone instead. Data were recorded using a phone recording application. Participants provided prior consent to have their interview recorded. At the start of each phone interview, I confirmed permission before beginning to record.

Data collection and data analysis proceeded simultaneously. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed inductively to identify emerged themes. Participants' interview responses and my reflective notes were organized into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. According to Nowell et al. (2017), to generate useful results, qualitative data analysis must be conducted in a methodical manner (p. 1). After completing each transcription, I did a brief analysis to organize the data for the next step. Ose (2016) found that Microsoft Excel was suitable for structuring interview responses for coding. The author further contended that “using an efficient method for sorting and structuring qualitative data releases resources for more thorough analyses” (p. 15). The method used

to analyze the data consisted of open and axial coding based on Creswell's six step process. Open coding involved searching participant responses for frequently used words or phrases related to persistence, assigning an initial code to the words or phrases, and recording participants' specific words. Next, the coding process entailed rereading the responses several times to identify common themes and patterns linked to the research question. The last step involved recognizing connections and overlapping meanings of the open codes. This axial process helped to combine the codes into defined categories to produce emerged themes.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions to provide information for the research question. Fifteen focal questions, along with probe and follow-up questions, were developed to align the research question. The set of interview questions uncovered information about the 12 freshman student participants' persistence experiences to remain at VU.

The themes that emerged from the phone interview data include: (a) freshmen rely on support systems to persist, (b) social concerns influence persistence, and (c) external factors affect students' FYE (see Table 3). I identified eight codes that aligned with the problem and research question (see Table 3). To present the findings, I assigned a numerical code to each participant to conceal their identity. The problem addressed by this study was the low retention of African American freshmen at a private HBCU. The research question was, How do academically at-risk first-year students at one HBCU describe what factors support and hinder their persistence during their first year in college?

**Table 3***Emergent Codes and Themes*

Research question (RQ)	Code	Theme
How do academically at-risk freshmen students at one HBCU describe what factors support or hinder their persistence during their first year in college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactions with Faculty/Staff</li> <li>• Personal factors</li> </ul>	Theme 1: Freshmen rely on support systems to persist
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic skills</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Financial support</li> </ul>	Theme 2: Social concerns influence persistence
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19</li> <li>• Learning environment</li> <li>• HBCU campus experience</li> </ul>	Theme 3: External factors affect students' first year experience

**Theme 1: Freshman Rely on Support Systems to Persist**

Lack of support is one of the hindrances to positive student outcomes. Research reinforces the notion that faculty-student relations are a strong indicator of positive student outcomes. This theme revealed that support could influence persistence.

***Interactions with Faculty/Staff***

Participants' responses showed that a pattern of positive benefits and overall college satisfaction were associated with student interactions with faculty. Research supports the idea that student-faculty interactions are important for college success. Faculty members can contribute to students' academic and social development and support persistence.

Interactions between VU students and faculty have been virtual, but most participants reported them as helpful. Student participant 12 (SP-12) said, "I was nervous

about attending college at first. My professors gave me hope that I can succeed. When people believe in you, you go the extra mile and try to do your best course work.” SP-04 described interactions with faculty as “cool.” SP-04 said that “faculty pushes us to stay focused in the remote classes and to do our best.” SP-05 similarly stated that “faculty are helpful. I’ve had pretty positive interactions. They encourage us to learn and voice our opinion.” Eight of the 12 participants expressed that COVID-19 affected in-person interactions with faculty/staff. However, participants conveyed that VU professors provided encouragement that contributed to increased satisfaction in their progress.

Participant SP-07 explained:

In one of my classes, the instructor took the time to show me how to understand my work. [The instructor] helped me throughout the course and did not make me feel stupid for not knowing. Without help, I couldn’t have made it.

The VU faculty maintains office hours to allow students to access one-on-one assistance and to obtain resources. Sometimes, students were reluctant to seek academic support. Two participants acknowledged experiencing difficulties in their classes but have not sought the help they need. The participants said: (a) “In the past teachers did not take the time to show me what I was doing wrong, so I try to keep up (SP-02); and (b) “Because I’m not outspoken, I don’t interact with the [VU]faculty....Many of the teachers I had [in high school] didn’t have the time to help me” (SP-09). The faculty demonstrates their willingness to help students succeed, but students must take advantage of the opportunity to seek help.



### *Personal Factors*

First-year students are at a higher risk of dropping out of college. Research indicated that persistence is primarily based on individual characteristics. Data analysis revealed that the participants recognized their need for academic support and planned to stay in contact with the VU support system. Participants' responses showed that they look to the faculty for assistance to successfully navigate their college experience.

In addition to the support of the faculty, participants contributed their ability to persist in taking ownership for their success, being a role model, and family pride. SP-12 persists because of determination for a better future. SP-10 said, "My goal is not to drop out but achieve...My focus has been to achieve and do what I need to do to stay in school. SP-11 possesses an intrinsic motivation to persist. "I've seen people lose their job, needing food, struggling to survive...Nothing is going to stop me from pursuing my dreams" (SP-11). SP-09 expressed the desire to persist to improve prospects. The participant said, "I want a better life than the one I grew up in."

When asked about persistence, the participants shared similar views about being motivated to succeed because of family. Many thought that a college education could provide themselves and their families access to better advantages in life. As first-generation students, some participants acknowledged feeling uncomfortable in the collegiate environment. SP-06 said, "My mother did not have the opportunity to go to school...Because I am the first to go [to college], she pushes me to get my degree." Likewise, SP-03's response revealed an intrinsic motivation to persist in college to inspire others. As a first-generation student, SP-03 wants to set an example for younger

family members. Like some of the other students, SP-03 at first did not feel like college was the best fit. The student had only taken remedial classes in high school. However, SP-03 realized that a college education opens possibilities for better career opportunities and economic stability.

## **Theme 2: Social Concerns Influence Persistence**

This theme revealed responses about reasons participants considered terminating their studies and the factors that could impede their persistence. Sources of social and emotional support consisted of church relationships, family, and cultural ties. Because of COVID, students had to find ways to maintain connections, even when physically apart from the campus. Codes related to participants' responses about factors that support or hinder persistence included academic skills, mentoring, and financial support.

### ***Academic Skills***

Data revealed that on the onset, participants lacked the academic preparation to pursue college successfully without assistance. Many only met the minimum requirements for acceptance into VU. SP-03 said, "Faculty been patient with students like me that didn't have the best educational experience going through public schools taking remedial English." Six of the 12 participants contemplated leaving VU before completing the first semester. They failed to understand the rigor and expectations of the college curriculum, Participants mentioned being overwhelmed with their course load, inadequate test-taking and time management skills, and being frustrated with virtual learning. Evidence of this from the responses included: "There was a moment where I said screw it. I was taking four classes and it was too hard" (SP-04); "I wanted to quit at

the start of the semester...Classes different than high school” (SP-03); and “The online classes are more challenging than high school. Time was a factor mentioned by many students. SP-01 alluded to having trouble with time management. SP-01 stated, “Classes are really hard. I don’t have as much time to complete the work like I did in high school.” “SP-07 considered leaving and returning to college after the pandemic when classes could be in person. SP-07 stated, “Online classes have made this experience harder for me.”

### ***Mentoring***

Sources of social and emotional support consisted of church relationships, family, and cultural ties. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, students had to find ways to stay connected to the university support system, even though physically separated from the campus. Participants mentioned no face-to-face access to mentors and tutors as a factor that could contribute to not persisting. Horton (2015) stated that “mentoring is critical for at-risk students, particularly those who (a) come from low income families, (b) are first-generation college students, (c) are members of minority groups, and (d) are confronted with life circumstances that create barriers to their success” (p. 94). Many of the VU students meet all of the abovementioned criteria for requiring mentoring services.

VU’s mentoring program provides services to help students integrate their academic and social needs to experience successful student outcomes. Participants recognized the need to seek support while adjusting to college life. SP-08 communicated that being a first-generation student was demanding. The student explained that family members have not gone to college. They do not understand all that it entails. One of SP-

08's professors recommended the mentoring program. The participant said, "My mentor helped me get adjusted [to college life] and cope with issues at home." SP-04 described positive experiences with mentors and tutors. The participant stated, "I get support from mentors...they encourage me....I receive help with whatever comes up." SP-06 received emotional support from church members and VU alumni. "The pastor and counselors call and check on us and give spiritual support...my mentor helped me make it to mid-term.

### ***Financial Support***

The enrollment at VU mostly consists of students from low-income backgrounds. That enrollment practice is common among HBCUs. Data responses revealed financial support as a major factor in student persistence. Participants experienced firsthand the effects of the pandemic on their economic situation. Some talked about parents and siblings who lost their jobs, working multiple jobs, or even sacrificing monies to help them stay in school. Many participants expressed concern that if their financial aid got reduced, they would have to leave college. "My mom did not finish high school....works two jobs to help me financially"; "Mother tries to help....Brother making sacrifice...working to maintain the family" (SP-01); "Attended college close to home to help family and get an education at the same time" (SP-11); Other quotations from data responses related to finances causing participants not to persist: "If I can't get financial aid"; "If I don't get assistance to pay for classes"; "Money...Not having outside help to pay for school"; "If I could not get the funds for classes"; "If could not pay my way through school"; and "Need financial security". One participant mentioned it would be stressful if the school's budget caused them to reduce financial aid packages.

### **Theme 3: External Factors Affect First Year Experience**

#### ***COVID-19***

Probably the most anticipated year of college is the freshman year. For some VU students, the FYE has been tolerable. However, for others, it has been disappointing due to being disrupted by the pandemic. Participants overwhelmingly cited the effects of COVID-19 as a factor on whether to persist. Participants reported family and friends losing jobs, experiencing issues with access to health care, hospitalizations, and death of loved ones due to the virus. Because of COVID-19, the VU campus remains closed, denying students access to the traditional college experience.

Participant responses were based on the conditions surrounding the pandemic. SP-05 had always wanted to attend VU. Along with other participants, SP-05 did not envision her freshman year being experienced remotely and physically isolated from college life. To describe their FYE, some participants used words such as, okay, not bad, and pretty good, while others describe it as frustrating and disappointing. When asked if they had an opportunity to restart their HBCU experience what would they change, all 12 participants agreed that there would not be a pandemic. SP-07 said, “Going to college during COVID has been stressful.” SP-03 said, “Haven’t had any [physical] interactions. “Things came to light since seeing the effect of COVID (SP05); and “COVID changed the way I think about life and death.” (SP-12).

#### ***Learning Environment***

A quality and engaging learning environment are critically important to student persistence. All participants got admitted to VU with academic deficiencies. No one

could predict that students' freshman year would be disrupted by a pandemic.

Participants' first experience with remote learning began during the 2020-2021 school year. Students often had difficulty navigating Microsoft Teams. "At first I wasn't used to doing classes online...I had to get help from my professors" (SP-08). SP-11 expressed the following:

When the instructor gives us assignments, we have to use the internet. Before college, I didn't have a lot of access to a computer or the internet because of my economic background. When I got to college, they gave me my own laptop, and a lot of things that I didn't have before. I was not used to doing classes online....It took me a while to get used to using the computer to attend my classes in Microsoft Teams.

Participants shared similar views about the challenges associated with adapting to remote learning. Being in college while at home adds extra burdens as students were expected to maintain their commitment to their family. "It's so much harder paying attention over a computer screen when there are distractions" (SP-02). "College at home not what I was expecting" (SP-09). Participants alluded to feeling isolated. "...depressing sitting in front of a computer....no socialization".

### ***HBCU Campus Experience***

Participants shared similar views about VU being their first choice. Reasons provided for wanting to attend an HBCU included: "to belong"; "to get involved in the college life"; and "to be with people of the same ethnicity". At the time of the interviews, no participants had been on campus due to COVID-19 restrictions. "Only thing done is

Microsoft Teams interaction” (SP-06). Even though learning remotely, students feel connected to the shared culture. “I participate in virtual events [with peers] because we can’t hang out” (SP-04). Eight of the 12 participants mentioned attending an HBCU important to be with others that “look like them”. Remote learning hinders participation in events associated with HBCU campus life. SP-04 stated, “I wanted to experience the things I heard and saw on TV”. “I wanted to attend the Black homecomings and participate in the fun events” (SP-05). Similarly, SP-08 conveyed:

I thought I would be attending college on campus....I looked forward to the activities I wanted to attend such as homecoming, a battle of the bands, games, talking and being with other students, and learning about my culture. Instead, I am in college through using a computer without personally being able to have a real conversation with other students about classes or life.

### **Interpretation of the Results**

This research study consists of an investigation of a single HBCU site. Because the problem at VU is the retention of freshmen students, I interviewed 12 freshmen about their FYE to understand what factors supported or hindered their persistence. It is important to note that the participants’ responses were affected by extenuating circumstances surrounding the pandemic and may not amply identify other influences likely to contribute to a freshman student’s decision to persist. The following emerged themes represent a set of factors that affected participants’ ability to persist: freshmen rely on support systems to persist, social concerns influence persistence, and external factors affect students’ FYE. Tinto (1987) concluded that the persistence process is a

function of a student's academic and social interactions of their college experiences. In response to the research question, participants identified factors that could support and factors that could hinder their ability to persist beyond their first year (see Table 4). The factors can be divided into the basic constructs of Tinto's (1987) model of student integration: pre-entry factors and academic and social systems. Pre-entry attributes include background and life experiences, family and community relationships, and past educational experiences. Academic and social systems consist of experiences related to college performance and intellectual growth. Social factors refer to relationships and connections outside of the classroom. When social integration occurs, students develop a sense of belonging.

**Table 4**

*Factors Influencing Persistence*

Construct	Factors that support	Factors that hinder
Preentry attributes	Determination and effort  Encouragement from family, friends, and church	Inadequate academic preparation for transition to college / Poor study skills Lack of experience with remote learning
Academic systems	First-year grades Intervention programs: Freshman seminar, tutoring, mentoring	First-year grades
Social systems	Interactions with faculty/staff HBCU on-campus experience	Finances Limited campus involvement / No connection with peers Environmental issues: COVID-19



Making a successful transition from high school to college is a challenge. Research suggests that the underlying reasons for students not persisting vary. Data supported the finding that the first year at VU presented a difficult challenge for the participants. Half of the participants considered dropping out during the first semester. Students were not academically or socially prepared to attend classes remotely. The transition from a structured in-person high school learning environment to online learning was unexpected. Data from my reflective journal supports the perception that many of the VU instructors were unprepared as well. The switch to online learning changed all aspects of the learning environment (Kebritchi et al., 2017). A member of the VU leadership team stated that more than half of the VU instructors began the 2020-2021 school year unprepared to facilitate remote learning. Ghazi-Saidi et al. (2020) found that many institutions of higher learning needed to provide training for staff on how to use online teaching tools. One concept revealed through the interview responses was that the students identified with their academic limitations and sought assistance through intervention programs, tutoring, and mentoring.

The participants reported being unprepared for the prolonged campus closure. Residing in on-campus housing, as opposed to living off-campus, contributes to an engaged college life, especially for first-year students (Schudde, 2016). Schudde (2016) found that freshmen living in university housing tend to have better academic outcomes, including GPA and second-year retention. Due to COVID-19, the students did not have physical access to the campus. Bean (1990) suggested that negative experiences such as

these affect students' engagement in college. Some participants reported feeling overwhelmed and stressed.

The campus closure affected students' ability to interact in person with faculty and peers. Participants reported that interactions with faculty, even though online, supported their persistence. Research supports the idea that involvement in the social system is just as critical to success in college as the academic system. Tinto (1993) argued that student integration into the two systems of the institution depends largely on them having positive campus experiences. Conversely, negative experiences decrease integration (Tinto, 1993). The encouragement and support from the VU faculty contributed to students' satisfaction with the university. Student involvement within the campus community is a factor positively linked to student motivation (Bean, 1982). At VU, initiatives are created to increase student involvement and enhance feelings of belonging during virtual learning. Still, students' low academic performance at mid-term and the need for face-to-face interaction posed a risk that some of the students might not complete the freshman year.

Another influence on the students' ability to persist was self-efficacy. The data responses showed that personal factors such as determination, family pride, and encouragement played a part in the academic persistence of the participants; however, determination to become something for themselves was just as important. Buzzetto-Hollywood and Mitchell's (2019) research indicated that effort and determination are positive predictors of the desire to achieve. However more than determination, the

authors recognized that a student's academic and social interactions influence their level of commitment to persist.

In their responses, the participants considered academic performance both a support and a hindrance to their ability to persist. Unsatisfactory grades during the mid-term caused some students to rethink the feasibility of pursuing an undergraduate degree. Some participants mentioned that an inadequate high school experience and poor study skills contributed to their low academic performance. Also, many of the participants mentioned financial difficulties as a major hindrance to persistence. A college education is necessary for participants to improve their prospects and earnings. Because students are from low-income families, financial aid is necessary for them to attend VU. Without financial aid, the students and their families would not be able to afford the cost of college.

### **Evidence of Quality**

In this study, I examined freshman first-year persistence at the local level. The limitations comprise features of the research design or methodology that influences the findings or credibility of the study (Price & Murnan, 2004; Ross et al., 2012; Simon & Goes, 2013). Data were limited to a single college site where demand exists to improve persistence and retention. Another limitation was with conducting student participants' interviews. My original plan was to schedule and conduct interviews at VU. The accuracy of the data reported for this study was dependent solely on the honesty of the students during a global pandemic.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other situations and populations (Anney, 2014). Participation in the study was limited to at-risk African American freshmen at a private HBCU located in an urban area. To ensure the study's findings can be applied to similar settings, I provided thick descriptions of the study site, the participants, the perspectives of participants, and other contextual factors such as the effects of the pandemic caused by COVID-19.

### ***Credibility***

Transcript validation and member checking established the credibility of the study. According to Anney (2014), member checking verifies whether the research findings represent credible information drawn from the participants' original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants' original perspectives (p. 276). I conducted the transcript validation and member checking through email by providing each participant a copy of their responses and a brief interpretation of the results generated from analyzing the data. When the participants evaluated the interpretation of the data, it contributed to eliminating researcher bias.

### ***Confirmability***

I established confirmability by providing a detailed account of my experiences in my reflective journal. Keeping a reflective journal allowed me to write about my understanding of the interview data and engage with the data on a level that would otherwise be difficult to achieve (Vicary et al., 2017). Saldaña (2014) described a reflective journal as "a place to dump your brain" about participants and the incidences

associated with the study (p. 32). Notes from my reflective journal established the integrity of what the participants experienced and perceived.

### **Conclusion**

In Section 2, I described the methodology used in this basic qualitative study. The purpose was to learn what factors influence at-risk freshman students' decision to persist or leave college. I conducted phone interviews during the fall semester of the participants' first year. I used open coding to analyze the data. The line-by-line coding allowed themes to emerge. This process continued until the data reached a point of saturation. To aid in providing a thick description of the research findings, I included quotations of participants' responses.

Researchers argue that the first-year college experience influences whether students decide to complete their undergraduate degree. Participants' first-year college experience at VU represented a blending of personal, academic, and social occurrences related to their transition from high school. Connolly (2016) maintained that first-generation students are likely to exhibit lower levels of persistence if they enter into college without a strong sense of purpose. Tinto (1993) recognized that for freshmen students to achieve and persist to their sophomore year, they must integrate into the academic and social systems of the institution which are guided by their pre-entry attributes. Through the perspectives of the participants, the findings uncovered factors that could support and hinder their decision to persist. The primary factors that support persistence included students' effort and determination, positive interactions with faculty/staff and peers, satisfactory grades which were mentioned also as a hindrance, and

access to the on-campus social culture. Factors that hinder persistence included lack of understanding of the technology needed for online learning, the inability to improve pre-college academic deficiencies, limited campus involvement, lack of financial assistance to pay for school, and outside forces beyond the influence of the university such as the pandemic.

Data analysis indicated that VU would benefit from having trained staff and administrators designing and facilitating the online learning experiences to provide quality technology in a supportive environment. The professional development (PD) project will allow administrators to improve the availability of academic and social resources targeted at the learning environment, including the quality of online instruction. In addition, administrators will gain a better understanding of why freshmen students do not persist and graduate.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

For this basic qualitative study, I investigated what factors influence an at-risk freshman student's decision to persist or leave college so that interventions related to positive change can be proposed. Despite VU administrators and faculty having a strong commitment to their work, freshman retention at the university continues to be among the lowest of all HBCUs in the region. Miller (2020) recognized that Black undergraduate enrollment has been on the decline since 2015. Similarly, Barshay (2020) pointed out that Black undergraduate enrollment across institutions in Summer 2020 was lower than that of Summer 2019. However, even before the pandemic, VU was experiencing a steady decline in first-time first-year student enrollment, stated the executive director of enrollment.

The results of this study provide an understanding from the participating freshman students' perspective as to what makes them persist beyond the first year. The results indicate that most of the participants' concerns could be addressed by utilizing and refining the student support services department to improve student persistence and, in time, degree completion. Fahnert (2015) argued that higher education faculty need advanced information and communication technology skills to adequately address administrative demands and facilitate learning and growth for their diverse student population.

Using the findings, I created a 3-day PD workshop for VU administrators and faculty that I titled *Improving Student Persistence at Victory University* (see Appendix

A). Khan and Chishti (2012) contended that appropriate training contributes to faculty being able to provide an optimum learning environment and experience for all students. The PD is intended to provide the workshop participants the tools needed to understand the social and academic problems that at-risk freshmen face during their first year, along with viable ways that the departments can support student needs. The purpose of the PD workshop is to further develop the skills of the administrators and faculty in helping at-risk African American freshmen persist in their courses and ultimately remain at VU until the completion of their degrees. At the end of the workshop, participants should demonstrate the ability to think rationally and logically about their roles in assisting at-risk freshmen to succeed. Administrators and faculty should know best practices for engaging in dialog about student persistence and retention. Participants should also be able to consider academic and nonacademic factors when designing and implementing retention strategies.

### **Rationale**

Previous research indicates that experiences such as being a first-generation student or coming from a low-income household presents barriers for freshmen and are connected to lower rates of persistence (see Jehangir, 2010; McFarland et al., 2018; Shaffer et al., 2015). I designed a 3-day PD workshop because the data analysis results in Section 2 revealed there was a need to provide training for the VU administrators, faculty, and staff to address the problem of low freshman retention. With only minimal technology skills, VU faculty and staff were expected to effectively facilitate remote learning for students who had little or no experience with learning in that type of setting.



PD is a broad term encompassing a variety of specialized training intended to improve professional practice and effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Mizell (2017) contended that the purpose of PD is for educators to improve the skills they need to address students' learning challenges. Similarly, Caffarella and Daffron (2013) stated that engaging in professional training encourages skill-building to respond to systemic problems, to achieve the desired goals, or to prepare for future opportunities and foster change. PD was the viable choice for the project because focused training on student persistence and retention would allow staff members to strengthen their knowledge and practice that encourages growth and development.

As mentioned in Section 2, for the 2020-2021 term, VU students attended their classes remotely rather than in-person on campus. The qualitative findings indicated that there was a lack of understanding among students in the study regarding how to use or navigate the computer software or access the internet for their classes. Participants expressed having difficulty communicating properly with administrators, faculty, staff, or peers about the academic and social challenges they were facing. Horton (2015) found that at-risk students usually have trouble recognizing that they are experiencing academic difficulty and are often reluctant to seek help. For many of the students this was their first time being in a remote learning setting. The scheduled office visits with their instructors were held virtually and were limited in what support the instructors could provide within the timeframe. According to the interview responses, many of the participants felt lost and did not know how to deal with their challenges or ask the right questions needed for them to be successful in their courses. Research indicates that at-risk students persist

when there is academic and social support from faculty, support staff, and family, and also self-determination to not give up and complete college (Jehangir, 2010; Tucker, 2014). Through my research, I wanted to bring awareness to the VU staff as to what supported or hindered the freshman students' persistence because there is little documented research that specifically addresses the topic. The PD should prepare VU administrators and faculty with capabilities and knowledge on how to help students persist during their freshman year and eventually graduate from college and receive their bachelor's degree.

### **Review of Literature**

HBCUs have provided access to higher education largely for African Americans and other students since 1964. Research shows that while representing only about 3% of higher education institutions nationally, HBCUs educate one in 10 Black students (Gasman & Samayoa, 2017). Providing access is a major accomplishment for HBCUs, but students must finish to gain the value of a postsecondary education. Strikwerda (2019) considered low retention a "human and financial tragedy" (para. 4). The author stated that building a culture of success for first-year college students takes a collaborative effort from each department. Horton (2015) asserted that colleges need to recognize the high-risk behaviors of their students to be effective facilitators of student support.

This literature review, based on the emerged themes, provided a conceptual perspective on student persistence as it related to African American freshmen at a local HBCU. I used the Walden University Library, Google Scholar, and other

multidisciplinary databases such as EBSCOhost, ERIC, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Ultimate to research relevant literature. A systematic search was conducted using the following keywords and phrases: *professional development, residential life, engagement of faculty, academic advisor, family support, student financial support, technology, hybrid/remote/in-classroom learning, alumni, and student support services*. Three themes emerged from the data analysis process that were used to inform the development of the project. The themes were that freshmen rely on support systems to persist, social concerns influence persistence, and external factors affect students' FYE.

The findings show that the VU administrators, faculty, and staff could benefit from receiving appropriate training to help improve freshmen student persistence and retention. Some departments retained a large percentage of their first-year students, while other departments retained as few as one in three students, according to the executive director of enrollment. One aspect of an institution's commitment to addressing the issue of student persistence and retention is the extent to which resources for relevant training for faculty and staff is provided (Strikwerda, 2019). Tinto and Pusser (2006) recognized that institutions must invest in training programs to enhance faculty members' understanding of the process of student persistence. PD is an appropriate genre for the project because research indicated that institutions which participate in on-going training activities are able to increase their capacity to improve the persistence and degree completion of their students (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

## **Professional Development**

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) described PD as structured learning that fosters a professional culture that results in improvements in teachers' knowledge and skills. PD provides the opportunity for teachers to learn with other practitioners to obtain feedback on their professional goals and intended changes in their instruction. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) asserted that the goal of all PD should be to equip educators with the tools and resources to support all aspects of student learning. The authors further acknowledged that effective PD ensures that educators are equipped to support complex student learning in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017; Rucker, 2018).

PD involves different formats. Burkman (2012) considered the most important aspect of PD is the way it is delivered. Common approaches to PD, before the pandemic, include education conferences, 1-day or multiday workshops, peer observations, and job-embedded collaborative learning (Burke, 2019; Desimone, 2011; Rucker, 2018). One-day workshops were the logical choice when staff members needed to implement new practices, strengthen old practices, or just learn some basic skills. Among researchers, 1-day workshops were considered the least effective. Kennedy (2016) stated that the PD format should include content knowledge, active participation, strategies, and skills for facilitators who are familiar with the needs, goals, and experiences of the targeted audience. For my project, I constructed a multiday workshop to provide opportunities for VU administrators, faculty, and staff to learn, practice, and reflect on solutions to improve student persistence and retention.

**Resident-Life**

The purpose of college residence halls is to provide students with a safe and supportive learning environment that promotes personal and social growth and development, as well as to support institutional goals (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; Williams, 2020). Social distancing mandates due to the COVID-19 pandemic have had a major impact on how colleges and universities teach students (Ali, 2020; Kebritchi et al., 2017). The results revealed that many participants were looking forward to beginning their college experience on campus. Participants alluded to wanting to experience the rich tradition of the “HBCU experience” of engaging students in a thriving and supportive environment where students develop a sense of belonging. The camaraderie and connections referred to by the participants equates to what Tinto (1993) viewed as leading to high levels of academic and social integration. The pandemic has interrupted campus activities. In deference for the safety and well-being of the VU community, the administrators made the decision to offer the first semester all online with the possibility of hybrid learning being implemented the second semester. Ali (2020) stated that even if there is some type of limitation in teaching students, the education of the students should not be impacted.

**Online/Remote Learning**

The role of college faculty has had to change unexpectedly from what used to be mostly on-campus in-person learning to virtual or remote classes (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020; Means & Neisler, 2020). Due to the immediacy of the change, faculty at many colleges and universities were not able to receive the proper training but rather received a

brief overview on how to utilize the applications needed for them to create a remote learning atmosphere for their students (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020). Fetter and Thompson (2020) conducted a study to understand the effect of COVID-19 on HBCU students' experiences. The authors found that the students cited difficulty with the online learning format as the primary effect of the pandemic. Blankstein et al. (2020) had similar findings in their study of undergraduate students at 21 non-HBCUs. The authors found that the students primarily mentioned the need for technical resources and support. At VU, faculty were left with only a few weeks to adjust to the way they facilitated learning. This created a stressful situation for those who felt they could not adapt quickly enough to the change. As a result, some faculty chose to leave the university. Other faculty members endured and learned how to utilize the tools needed to deliver quality online instruction.

The expansion of online learning has placed an increased level of responsibility on colleges and universities to provide students with qualified instructors able to design online lessons and teach remotely (Borup & Evmenova, 2019). This is particularly true at many HBCUs because they generally operate on a smaller budget than other public colleges and universities. In 2008, Joseph recognized the influence of technology in education. Joseph (2008) maintained that "Technology has become a necessary part of higher education. It is therefore important that faculty members accept and utilize hardware and software in communication and instruction" (p. 90). Similarly, Islim and Sevim Cirak (2017) acknowledged that since technology use is widespread in all aspects of people's lives, educators need to redesign their courses to adopt the new technologies. Some HBCU's have been using technology in the classroom to deliver innovative

instruction for several years while others have not (Joseph, 2008). At VU, some faculty members still lack the skills necessary to become proficient in using the applications needed to provide students with a successful online classroom experience.

Microsoft Teams is used at VU to facilitate remote learning. The IT department is responsible for the implementation of the infrastructure and for training teachers on how to use Microsoft Teams effectively. One of the disadvantages that VU, as well as other HBCUs, did not realize is that many of the faculty members and students did not have access to a computer or high-speed internet at home. In many instances, students and faculty would use the computer resources on campus to access the internet to complete tasks for work, class, and research.

Miller et al. (2019) pointed out that faculty members must stay empowered to ensure that their students are supported in their efforts to persist. Tinto (2012) stated that institutions have to focus on improving classroom success by changing the way classes are taught and structured, especially during the first year of college. Low retention at colleges and universities can affect the financial stability of the institution. If a college cannot retain its students, then its student attrition is impacted, which could result in a loss of funding allocated for those students (McMahon, 2018).

### **Hybrid Learning**

Technology has played a vital role in transforming learning to accommodate students' learning needs. Due to COVID-19, technology more so has changed how and where students learn. VU leaders considered providing the option for students to participate in hybrid learning. Hybrid learning is a type of blended learning model that

provides students with both in-person and online learning to attend college (Pazich et al., 2018). The terms *hybrid learning* and *blended learning* are often used synonymously. However, differences exist between the two models. Blended learning equally balances distance learning with in-person instruction, whereas hybrid learning incorporates the learning technique that works best to teach the content (Reed, 2020). Essentially, the difference between a blended course and a hybrid course is the amount of online learning involved.

COVID-19 has impacted the financial stability of many colleges and universities. Johnson (2019) stated that “No college has the human resources to offer an endless variety of courses and programs, and the smaller the institution, the greater the constraints” (p. 8). If properly implemented at VU, hybrid learning could improve the curriculum and allow the students the chance to attend courses in alternate ways. The faculty plays an important role in hybrid learning along with the institution’s ability to invest in the resources (Pazich et al., 2018). To implement hybrid learning, VU would first need to provide sustainable technology-related PD for all faculty and staff. Technology is the means for delivery and requires a close cross-collaboration between instructional, content, and technology teams (Ali, 2020). Xu and Jaggars (2014) found that student performance, particularly for at-risk students, can seriously suffer in online courses. Although the hybrid format adapts better to varying learning styles, the format could present a challenge for VU freshmen who are already struggling with their academics and organizational skills.



Bhute et al. (2021) determined that for schools to return to on-campus learning, a stopgap solution would have to be put in place to ensure student safety. Hawkins (2020) added that reopening the campus should provide students, faculty, and staff a safe and positive learning experience. To that end, VU's main goal is to create a plan that would allow them to bring the students back to on-campus classes in a safe and correct manner.

### **Institutional Services**

Many first-time students enroll in college unaware of the challenges associated with entering the culture of higher education. Previous research indicated that experiences such as being a first-generation student, or coming from a low-income household present barriers for freshmen and are associated with lower rates of persistence (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Tinto and Pusser (2006) identified academic support, social support, and financial support as vital aspects to student success.

Some first-generation students often leave college without completing their degrees. Quinn et al. (2019) mentioned that challenges that first-generation students experience during the first year of college often begin during the secondary school years. Many first-generation students look at attending college to have a better future (Quinn et al., 2019). The freshmen participants in the study enrolled in VU with academic challenges, social problems, and family factors that caused some of the students to consider not returning after the first semester. First-generation students are usually underprepared and need extra assistance with their academic needs (Quinn et al., 2019).

According to Tinto (1993), as cited in the work of Schudde (2016) departure from college by first-generation students happens when students experience low academic and

social integration. Bean and Eaton (2000) stated that for students to experience social integration requires social support from their educational institutions. The data analysis results revealed that the participants felt their experiences in high school contributed to them not being prepared academically for college. One participant expressed that for almost 2 years of his high school years he had substitute teachers that were not familiar with the course material and thus not able to provide the conditions needed to promote success. The participants alluded to family support, especially from their mothers, as the motivation for them being able to persist. The fact that students participated in their classes remotely allowed them to bond even closer to their family members and be role models.

Fain (2020) acknowledged that colleges face criticism about their role in promoting educational gaps that affect African American and other underserved students. Inequities in higher education have been well documented and evidence suggests that these inequities have been exacerbated by COVID-19 (Fetter & Thompson, 2020). Improving student persistence and retention requires a sustained commitment from all stakeholders at the institution (Roberts, 2018). Tinto (1993) stated that the first principal of student retention programs is an “institutional commitment to students” (p. 1). Social justice demands that faculty provide students the necessary support to reduce educational disadvantages, and help students persist to degree completion (St. Amour, 2020; Tinto, 2017b). Kimbark et al. (2017) recognized that student support programs vary by institution and are considered essential to retention efforts. VU offers federal TRIO programs to help support students in their quest for higher education to earn a degree.

When first arriving at VU, some students were afraid to seek help from the faculty or advisors even though tutoring services were available. Horton (2015) mentioned that academically at-risk students often do not proactively seek assistance. In some cases, the students postponed receiving support services until they were about to fail the course (Henry, 2021). Even though VU monitors at-risk freshman students' achievement and works to ensure the students understand the availability and the importance of accessing institutional support, freshman persistence and retention remain a problem. Providing the VU administrators, faculty, and staff with the resources for understanding the types of issues that freshmen students bring to college will allow them to design learning strategies and supports to facilitate success. Training at the PD workshop will reinforce student persistence, retention, and success by focusing on the best practices participants need to address the at-risk academic and social behaviors of freshman students.

### **Project Description**

The main focus of the PD project was to build leadership capacity across the VU administrators, faculty, and staff to enable them to develop best practices to address the problem of freshmen student retention. Between 1976 and 2010, enrollment at HBCUs fell from 18 to 9% with no real change from 2010 to 2018 (Bunn, 2020). The results indicated that many of the participants experienced difficulty adjusting to college and considered dropping out during the first semester. Also, many of the faculty and staff members needed to make gains in adapting their skills to align with the needs of the students.

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

Different levels of government share the responsibility of monitoring institutions of higher learning to ensure they provide students a quality and cohesive education. Because postsecondary institutions are subject to federal and state policies, access to resources and supports vary. Grants are available through the U.S. Department of Education and other government agencies specifically for the improvement of education (Education Commission of the States, 2021). However, states and localities share the responsibility of establishing educational institutions. VU utilizes federally funded programs that filter through to states and localities such as the TRIO student support services program to support postsecondary students.

Because colleges and universities consist of hierarchical structures that can impede timely action to address their goals, having the support of the institution's executive team is imperative. VU administrators will be a potential resource because they are committed to supporting students to improve persistence and retention. I will utilize resources through VU's student support services department, as well as other departments to implement the PD project and therefore will not require an extensive budget. VU personnel will be solicited to provide expert advice and support.

### **Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions to Barriers**

To implement the project, three potential barriers exist; support, buy-in, and perception. Every part of the campus community contributes to the success of its students. Lack of complete support from members of the VU administrators and department leaders could harm the project. This potential barrier could impede

implementation and hinder the university from moving forward in a timely manner with improving the academic and social connections for their at-risk African American freshmen. A potential solution to ensuring support would be to present the project to the VU administrators in a one-to two-page summary supported by empirical research and based on best practices. This action would allow the administrators to weigh the potential benefits of the PD workshop to lead to significant reform for school initiatives.

The second potential barrier could be the lack of buy-in from the VU faculty and staff. Blank (2013) identified effective PD as training that engages teachers in relevant learning experiences linked to the workplace. Resistance toward change could affect buy-in as well (Torff, 2018). To address the potential barrier, the PD workshop content would be meaningful and associated with the campus concerns about student persistence and retention. Attention would be given to the faculty and staff members' stake in the outcome. Another solution to securing buy-in could be to promote collaboration on the agenda for the workshop by soliciting suggestions from faculty and staff on what is needed, along with providing opportunities for extended support.

The VU student support services coordinate the programs that promote better academic and social outcomes for the students, especially those identified as high-risk for withdrawing from college during their first year. The barrier of perception could cause the student support services department to feel that they do not need to improve on their skills of working with at-risk African American freshmen. A possible solution could be to collaborate with the student support services program leaders to assist with guiding the implementation of the project.

## **Proposal for Implementation of the Project**

Using the results from the data, I designed a PD project to provide training opportunities for the professional community at VU. According to Kennedy (2016), a meaningful PD format should include content relevant to the targeted audience, active participation, and a clearly defined outcome. The objectives for the 3-day PD workshop are to (a) build capacity, (b) examine the factors that support or hinder at-risk freshmen students' persistence to help improve VU freshmen retention, (c) explore possible solutions to increase the freshmen students' academic and social integration levels for in-person, hybrid, and remote classes, and (d) review best practices for the implementation of viable strategies to improve student persistence that can result in higher retention.

Permission will first be obtained from the university leadership team to implement the project. The PD workshop will be held at a location on the university campus. If the COVID 19 restrictions are still in place, the workshop will be conducted virtually. I intend to begin the pre-implementation process in the spring at the end of the regular school year. Current student retention data will be gathered to better understand university concerns. The PD training and materials will be modified based on the feedback. I include a full description of the proposed implementation of the PD project in Table 5.

**Table 5***Proposed Timetable for Implementation*

Date and phase	Step
May-July Preimplementation	Permission to implement project obtained from local site leadership Proposed PD project presented to university administrators and leadership team for feedback Administrators meet to determine university concerns and PD training needs Administrator or designee present project to department heads for feedback of PD training needs of each department Revise PD training and materials based on feedback
August Implementation	Implement PD project Day 1 – Full day PD (Focus: Role of stakeholders in improving retention) Review progress of implementation and modify accordingly  Day 2 – Full day PD (Focus: Theories of Vincent Tinto and John Bean, academic integration, advising, academic support) Review progress of implementation and modify accordingly  Day 3 – Full day PD (Focus: Social integration, professional learning communities, social integration of students into the campus community)
September-October Postimplementation	Evaluation and reflection of project implementation Project wrap-up

**Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others**

My responsibility as the scholar practitioner entails presenting the project to the VU administrators and to obtain permission to implement the project at the college site. I intend to maintain communication and work collaboratively with the VU administrators throughout the process. The project will be modified accordingly based on university feedback to make certain it matches the VU needs and concerns. Also, I will be responsible for scheduling, coordinating, implementing, facilitating the PD training workshop, and analyzing the evaluation data for the project. Responsibilities of the VU

administrators involve maintaining communication with the scholar practitioner, soliciting feedback about the project from appropriate department leads, allocating resources such as coordinating with the student support services department, overseeing the participation of faculty and staff in the PD workshop, and providing follow up with department leaders to ensure the solutions are implemented with fidelity. Following the workshop, members of the student support services department will be expected to assist faculty and staff with on-going training to improve the level of support services offered to the students.

### **Synopsis of the Professional Development Workshop**

The workshop will provide PD opportunities for the professional community at VU. The participants will include VU administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Three sophomores that were identified as at-risk students during their freshman year will be invited to participate in the PD workshop. The project consists of 3 full days of training. The proposed activities for the workshop will include icebreakers, group activities, role-play demonstrations, video presentations, and informational sessions while incorporating various forms of technology. See Appendix A for a complete description of the project.

#### ***Daily Focus***

- **Day 1** – The focus of Day 1 is to understand the role that each stakeholder has in working to retain students.
- **Day 2** – The focus of Day 2 is on understanding the theories of Vincent Tinto and John Bean, academic integration, advising, and academic support.



- **Day 3** – The focus of the final day will be social integration, learning communities, and ways that VU departments can socially integrate students into the campus community.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

Evaluation of the project will focus on the usefulness of the PD workshop to bring about improvements to student persistence and retention. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) established that a well-designed PD plan, when effectively implemented, can lead to desirable changes in teacher practice and student outcomes. An outcome-based evaluation will be used to measure the effectiveness of the project. TSNE Missionworks (2018) described outcome-based evaluation as evaluations that assess the effectiveness of training in producing change and the extent to which it met its goals. Similarly, Segerholm (2010) stated that an outcome-based evaluation compares the project results with the program goals that are set in advance. The full ramifications of the effectiveness and integrity of the PD workshop cannot be identified until the college and university fall-to-spring retention rates are reported.

The evaluation form will be designed using a Likert-style 4-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. It includes three items and three open-ended questions. The items on the evaluation form pertain to the quality of the content, quality of the presentations and activities, and future learning. The participants will complete an evaluation form at the end of each session. The evaluation data will be used as a tool to monitor whether the daily goals and objectives of the workshop were met. The information will also be used to ensure that the delivery methods of the workshop are

appropriate for adult learners. The questions on the form do not request any personal information from the participants. A section for questions, comments, and suggestions will be included on the form. The questions that generate from the evaluation will be addressed the following day at the beginning of the workshop.

The completed forms will be used to analyze the effectiveness of the workshop based on the participants' feedback about the overall project and each daily session. Once the PD workshop is completed, all three days of the evaluations will be compiled and generated as a report to be given to the university administrators. The administrators will be responsible for disseminating the results of the evaluation to faculty and staff. The project evaluation form is displayed in Appendix A.

## **Project Implications**

### **Local Community**

Embedded in the outcomes of any professional training is the expectation of change in practice. The PD project is intended to contribute to social change by increasing the knowledge and skills of VU administrators, faculty, and staff on how to improve student persistence among at-risk African American freshman students to increase retention. As a result of the PD workshop, the VU administrators will be able to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of their student support system. Moving forward, this will allow the different departments to be more effective in implementing best practices for student support and eliminate barriers to degree completion. By learning about the perspectives of at-risk students that have persisted, the university will be able to improve their follow-up support to all faculty and staff so that they will be

better equipped to support the students. VU will also be able to develop other programs and services to help students have a positive college experience.

### **Far-Reaching**

The freshmen retention rate functions as one of the primary means used to evaluate how well colleges and universities are serving their students. Freshmen retention is a federally defined system for tracking the percentage of full-time students who persist beyond the first year at the same institution (Burrell, 2018; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). In the larger context, recognizing high-risk behaviors of students not persisting will allow colleges and universities to be more effective at facilitating student learning and success. Although the results from this study were generated from a single site HBCU, other institutions can use the strategies and ideas developed in the 3-day PD workshop at their sites to improve the quality of their student support services to help students remain at their college beyond the first year and eventually graduate.

### **Conclusion**

In Section 3, I described a PD workshop based on the results from the study discussion provided in Sections 1 and 2. Scholarly research was used to provide the solutions for the study. The purpose of the 3-day PD workshop was to improve the skills and knowledge needed for the faculty, staff, and student support service department to help the freshmen students persist at VU and eventually complete their degree. Tinto's (1993) theory of integration and Bean's (1980) model of student persistence served as the

foundation for this study and the PD workshop. In Section 4, I reflect on the doctoral project study process and provide a conclusion.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

In this study, I examined the reasons why at-risk freshmen do not persist beyond the sophomore year at a local HBCU. I gained this insight by evaluating the participants' interview responses. I conducted a comprehensive review of the literature based on the themes that emerged from the data analysis. From the findings, I developed a 3-day PD workshop for the administrators, faculty, and staff at the study site. The PD provides the participants with the knowledge and skills to assist their students in persisting and may improve student retention. A proposal for implementing and evaluating the project was presented in Section 3.

In Section 4, I discuss the strengths and limitations of the project and provide a reflective analysis of the data findings. I present information on my experiences in researching and writing the doctoral project study. I also present details on how the PD project may contribute to social change and a reflection on the importance of the work.

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

I designed the project to address VU's goals of improving freshmen student persistence and retention. The data results revealed that the administrators, faculty, and staff could benefit from learning more about the factors that support or hinder student persistence, as well as exploring ways of improving retention. The strengths and limitations regarding the project are discussed in this section.

## **Strengths**

The project has several strengths. The first strength involves the participants. Tinto (2017b) asserted that the best method for institutions to understand how to confront the problem of retention is to connect with the students' perspective of the topic. More research exists on why students do not persist rather than why they succeed (VitaNavis, 2020). I conducted this study to obtain students' perspectives on how their institutions can help them succeed. I interviewed 12 VU students, all of whom were freshmen at risk of dropping out who had persisted past their first semester. From the participants' responses, I was able to gather thick and rich descriptions to understand factors that hindered and, more importantly, supported participants' persistence while at VU.

The second strength of the project is that the PD workshop is designed to encourage collaboration and participation and involves almost all the departments at the university. One aspect of an institution's commitment to improve student persistence and increase retention is providing relevant training for their faculty and staff (Strikwerda, 2019). Potentially, I will present the project to VU stakeholders and will serve as the catalyst for systemic change at the institution.

The third strength of the project is the vast amount of literature available on the topics of student persistence and retention. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018), student retention is one of the most widely researched topics in higher education. I extensively reviewed the existing research to provide substantive information and activities during the PD workshop. The PD workshop will allow VU administrators, faculty, and staff to examine the effectiveness of

their student support services program and identify best practices about student persistence and retention.

The final strength, which is also a limitation, is that the PD project was developed for a single HBCU site. Many HBCUs have the same student demographics and are also experiencing low graduation rates (Gordon et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2018). Therefore, the project can be implemented at other HBCU sites to help improve student persistence and increase retention.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the project were due to the coronavirus pandemic. Because of the COVID-19 restrictions, I was uncertain whether the workshop would be held in person or virtually. I created a workshop plan that could be adapted for either face-to-face or online training. McConnell et al. (2013) found that teachers prefer PD when delivered in person. Research indicated that in-person PD training allows for a greater level of engagement and social interaction than virtual. However, McConnell et al. (2013) also found that PD delivered virtually can be just as effective.

The second limitation was associated with the length of the PD workshop that I developed for the project. I designed a 3-day workshop. Short-term workshops are not considered effective. Research suggests that PD training must be offered over longer periods for teachers to develop skills that result in a lasting change in practices (McConnell et al., 2013; Nicolas, 2019).

The final limitation that I also mentioned as a strength concerns the findings. I gathered data from a single site representing a cohort of freshmen. The project was

developed to address freshmen student persistence and retention. Nationwide, at HBCUs and other institutions of higher learning, freshmen retention is an issue (Field, 2018).

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

The purpose of the project is to provide VU leaders information on how their HBCU could effectively implement programs and strategies to increase the persistence of freshmen students. An alternative approach to addressing retention in higher education is through strategic statements and policy papers (Beer & Lawson, 2017). The aforementioned approach uses a cause-and-effect framework that has proven unsuccessful in improving the student academic resources and special programs available at the institution. Beer and Lawson (2017) used a quantitative approach to address retention. The authors analyzed data from student exit surveys conducted at multiple universities to conceptualize the problem. The data provided an accurate description of students' situations and needs.

The pandemic has brought about changes to individuals' daily lives (Siegenthaler & Calhoun-Brown, 2021). Addressing the problem of student retention during a pandemic requires a different focus because college students are subjected to more stressful experiences (Yoo et al., 2020). As a result of COVID, VU freshmen students witnessed sickness and death of family members and friends, job loss, and many struggled to meet basic needs. Emotional stress impaired students' ability to concentrate on their coursework. Financial problems limited access to Wi-Fi and the internet, and academic and social resources. Addressing retention involves institutions adapting their resources to address students' top concerns that relate to basic needs.



Research suggests that the attrition rate is higher for online courses versus courses on campus that meet in person (Bawa, 2016; Gaytan, 2015). The 2020-2021 school year was the VU students' first experience with remote learning. Retention could also be affected by students not being able to succeed in a virtual learning situation as opposed to in-person learning. Perhaps, in the interim, more consideration needs to be given to understanding VU students' challenges with online learning.

### **Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change**

#### **Scholarship**

When I decided to pursue a doctorate, I did not know what to expect. I knew I wanted to research some aspect of HBCUs. HBCUs continue to provide access to higher learning predominately for Black and minority students (Toldson, 2018). According to statistics noted by the *U.S. News & World Report (How U.S. News Calculated the 2019 Best Colleges Rankings, 2018)*, HBCUs rank high in educating students of underrepresented populations but struggle with first-year full-time retention. My goal for researching HBCUs was to bring awareness to the relevancy of the institutions. My study provides a critical assessment of the issue of retention. As a scholar practitioner, I was able to gain an understanding of what hindered and supported the academic success of at-risk freshmen.

During the doctoral process, I had several chairs and second committee members. I did not realize this would be an almost 7-year journey. In working on my study, I was able to use the knowledge from my courses to retrieve the professional literature to enhance my study. Conducting scholarly research has helped to develop my problem-

solving and critical thinking skills. I used my acquired skills to read and analyze the literature. I also improved on my ability to think in-depth about and understand the perspectives of others. The most satisfying benefit of being a scholar practitioner was the personal satisfaction and fulfillment that comes from achieving my goal.

### **Project Development**

I had no experience developing a project before working on my doctorate, especially constructing one guided by research grounded in theory. As a member of a school's support staff, creating a PD workshop for teacher professionals was not a part of my job responsibilities. Investigating student persistence and retention in a real-world setting allowed me to bring awareness to an issue that concerns institutions of higher learning. Developing the project allowed me to contribute to positive change for African American students at a local HBCU and beyond.

My aim as the project developer was to create a PD workshop that was relevant to the needs of the participants. The findings of my study gave me an understanding of persistence from the students' perspective. The project was grounded in research and practice. As a scholar-practitioner, I strove to meet the learning characteristics of adult learner workshop participants. Knowles et al. (2015) characterized adult learners as intrinsically motivated and problem-oriented. Semadeni (2009) considered it "a challenge to motivate teachers to incorporate best practices, especially tenured teachers who sometimes ignore innovations" (para. 1). I have learned a lot from my research that allowed me to create a detailed plan of action. My first step in creating the project was to identify the goals. The desired outcome for the 3-day workshop was to provide the

college professionals with practical information about implementing the best practices to better support their students in attaining degree completion.

As I reflect on my role as a practitioner, I feel destined to remain a lifelong learner to continue to add insight to the topic of retention at HBCUs in broader contexts of educational equity. According to McClintock (2004), “scholar-practitioners assess the impact of their work” (p. 393). I was able to understand the problem of persistence and learned how to apply theory and practice to develop the PD workshop. I believe that we are mentors for life and are duty-bound to help those in need of our support. I will apply my knowledge from being a doctoral student to assist with performing future work.

### **Leadership and Change**

The concept of leadership has evolved over the years. In the early years, leadership was associated with power and control. Moore (1927) defined leadership as “the ability to impress the will of the leader on those being led to encourage obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation” (p. 124). Today’s definitions of leadership describe it as a process. Northouse (2019) defined leadership as the practice of influencing or motivating a group of individuals to accomplish or achieve a shared goal. Braxton et al. (2014) affirmed that the responsibility of improving student persistence and retention rests with the policy makers, administrators of the institution, and scholar-practitioners of higher education.

The idea of researching student persistence and retention at HBCUs grew out of my concern for the success of at-risk African American students. In preparing and completing my final study and project, I feel that my role was that of a leader. I

developed a plan and prepared the resources on how the VU administrators and faculty could improve student persistence and retention. By working on my doctoral studies, I was able to learn how to become an effective scholar-practitioner, project developer, and leader. My passion for the topic of student retention empowered me to thoroughly explore the professional literature used in my study to bring awareness to the problem of retention, as well as the effectiveness of HBCUs to meet the educational needs of their students.

According to McCaslin (2017), leaders are tasked with the ability to manage change and “advance the potential and possibilities of the community of practice” (para 6). This doctoral journey presented challenges, but it allowed me to create a 3-day workshop to help VU implement current and future changes to support its students and faculty. During this journey, I also discovered the importance of social change for directing the results toward improvement beyond the local site. I intend to use the knowledge that I gained from this doctoral program to further influence the success of minority students at HBCUs.

### **Reflection on the Importance of the Work**

HBCUs have provided access to higher learning for minority students for many decades. The institutions were the forerunners in educating low-income, first-generation Black students. HBCUs have produced generations of leaders across the nation and continue to “consistently and affordably produce the leaders of the future” (Lomax, 2015, para. 7). In recent years, the institutions have battled with declining enrollment and

financial conundrum. HBCUs continue to play an important role in higher learning and should be preserved.

This study is important because researching student persistence draws attention to the work of HBCUs to educate those “most at risk of not entering and completing college” (Lomax, 2015, para. 3). I learned from the professional literature that minority students are attending college in record numbers. However, the data indicates that African American students lag in degree completion. The findings of my study revealed the factors that hindered or supported their efforts to be successful in college. The PD project provides the VU administrators, faculty, and staff with the training and resources to improve freshmen student persistence, which in turn can improve retention.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The local site was experiencing low student retention. Many of their freshmen were dropping out during their first year and not returning for their sophomore year. At the start of the first semester, many of the freshman participants questioned their ability to be successful in college because of their low GPA in high school. The study results indicate that the students had difficulties transitioning from high school to college, but relied on support from the faculty and staff, family, and their extended family community to persist.

The first to second-year retention rate at the local site remains consistently lower than the state and national average. The 4-year on time graduation rate in 2017-2018 decreased to 7%, whereas the national average was 35.8% (U.S. Department of Education, n. d.). Freshmen at HBCUs experienced lower persistence than freshmen at

other institutions. I used the knowledge that I gained from participant interviews and professional literature to create the PD training. The results indicated that VU could benefit from using presurveys and exit surveys of at-risk African American freshmen to capture their academic and social growth against other enrolled African American freshmen. The surveys would be voluntary and confidential. The information from the surveys would allow VU to develop ways to improve the services provided to the students, as well as help to engage the faculty in promoting student success. Research shows that students who participate in the student support services program at their college or university are more apt to persist through to degree completion (Dortch, 2016).

The potential impact on social change may be an increase in the number of VU freshmen that persist to graduation completion and ultimately increase retention. In a larger context, the study results can support institutional changes, as well as contribute to the research on improving the achievement of at-risk African American students at colleges and universities. The students may be better prepared to take on leadership roles and responsibilities within their community, and beyond its borders.

Numerous studies support the notion of improving the college residential learning environment where students can engage in authentic learning in their residential housing situation (Whitcher-Skinner et al., 2017). The authors pointed out that the living and learning communities bridge the gap between the students and faculty while creating the structure usually needed by first-year first-generation students. Connecting social engagement and academics allows students to develop camaraderie and a sense of belonging. Tinto (1993) emphasized that when students feel valued, they develop a sense

of connectedness to their college environment which leads to higher levels of academic and social integration.

Future longitudinal research could be conducted to examine the at-risk African American freshman experiences through their sophomore year and determine the factors that allowed them to complete their first year and return to college after their first year to persist through to graduation. Another opportunity for future research could be to examine the college experiences of students with average or above-average GPAs and interview them using the same questions used with the at-risk students to understand what factors contributed to them persisting in college. The scholars could then examine and compare the data collected for the at-risk African American freshman and the other African American freshman and see why some students in each group persisted during their first semester and returned to school to continue their education. The data would also allow institutions to create best practices for improving the student support services department along with the faculty-student engagement.

### **Conclusion**

Over a decade ago, Tinto (2006) considered low student retention in higher education a national problem. Student persistence and retention are still an issue at colleges and universities. The focus of this basic qualitative study was to learn what factors influence at-risk freshmen students' decision to persist or leave college so that interventions to positive change can be proposed. While working toward my doctorate, I have gained an understanding of student persistence and the effect it has had on at-risk African Americans at a local HBCU. The findings of my research led me to develop a PD

workshop that will help the faculty, staff, and student support services department at the study site to improve their role in assisting students to persist and ultimately complete their degree.

Higher education can only bring advancement when students make it to degree completion. Education must continue to be accessible, affordable, and equitable for all. Additional research is needed to better understand the problem of first to second-year student retention that will influence at-risk African American freshmen to persist at institutions of higher learning.



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## Appendix A: The Project

**Title:** Improving Student Persistence at Victory University

This project is comprised of a professional development training workshop for the administrators, faculty, and staff at a private urban 4-year liberal arts, coeducational HBCU located in the southeastern region of the United States.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this 3-day event is to train members of the student support services, faculty, and staff to identify the needs of at-risk African American freshmen along with increasing the students' degree completion at VU. The training allows participants to understand first-hand the challenges the freshmen students face during their first semester at VU. The material covered in the 3-Day workshop was based on information that emerged during the data collection and analysis phase of the study.

**Goal:** The goal of the professional development is to provide needed information that will help the student support services center along with the administrators, faculty, and staff to address the issues of freshmen student persistence and declining first-year student retention. The research of Tinto's Student Integration (1975, 1993) and Beans' Causal Model of Student Attrition (1980, 1982) provides the basis for the training. The theorists support the notion that involvement, or academic and social integration, is a primary condition for postsecondary students' success. Students are more likely to succeed when they receive the proper supports through student support services.

**Desired Learning Outcomes:**

- Establish a clear understanding of VU's mission to improve at-risk African American freshmen student persistence and retention

- Increase knowledge about the factors that support and hinder student persistence
- Develop best practices to improve the systematic process of implementing assistance to students through the student support services center as well as integrating support within the college course and classroom learning
- Acquire tools and strategies to improve classroom management skills
- Identify early signs of high-risk academic behaviors to avert students failing a course or dropping out

**Target Audience:** The target audience consists of university administrators, faculty, and staff.

**Timeline:** 3-day professional development workshop.

**Presentation Layout:** A timed agenda will be used daily to manage the various activities in the workshop. The allocated times for each item will be considered fluid to allow for authentic learning.

### Professional Development Workshop Agenda

<b>Time</b>	<b>Day 1</b>	<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Day 3</b>
<b>8:30-9:00</b>	Welcome video, Introduction of facilitator and presenters, and Day 1 Objectives	Day 2 Objectives Opening activity: <i>Do You Know Your Neighbor?</i> Questions from Day 1	Day 3 Objectives Questions from Day 2
<b>9:00-9:30</b>	Opening activity: <i>Pick That Role</i>  Presentation: Going to an HBCU	Synopsis of theories of Vincent Tinto and John Bean	Opening activity: <i>Fact or Fiction?</i>
<b>9:30-10:00</b>	Define Retention Present local site data	Video and Discussion: Vincent Tinto Video on Student Retention	Presentations and Discussions: Social Integration Residential Life Campus Programming
<b>10:00-10:15</b>	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>10:15-11:00</b>	Present study findings Define Student Persistence	Role playing activity with students using Microsoft Teams. Students will provide feedback and answer questions from participants	Presentations and Discussions: Social Integration Residential Life Campus Programming
<b>11:00-12:00</b>	Group discussion: Student Persistence	Brainstorm activity and Gallery Walk	Continue presentations and discussions
<b>12:00-1:00</b>	<b>Lunch</b>	<b>Lunch</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
<b>1:00-2:00</b>	Presentation and discussion: Student Support Services	Participants will role play about their best practices and solutions	Brainstorm activity (Next Steps)
<b>2:00-2:30</b>	Presentation and discussion: Student Advising	Presentation and discussion: Financial Wellness and Financial Aid	Gallery Walk presentation

<b>2:30-2:45</b>	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>2:45-3:00</b>	Continue presentation and discussion: Student Advising	Continue financial aid discussion	Participant Reflections and Feedback
<b>3:00-3:15</b>	Final Thoughts	Final Thoughts	Final Thoughts
<b>3:15-3:30</b>	Collect questions to be addressed on Day 2	Collect questions to be addressed on Day 3	
	Evaluation	Evaluation	Final Evaluation
<b>3:30</b>	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal



## Project Facilitators Guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide prospective facilitators and planners with tips to implement this 3-day professional development workshop project.

### *Suggested preparation tips for PD workshop*

- Connect with university leaders to determine needs and expectations of the workshop
- Prepare registration/check-in materials
- Prepare evaluation handout.
  - To make analyzing the data/feedback easier, the evaluation handout should be a different color for each day.
- Make name tags and table tents
- Determine participant group assignments
- Determine agenda based on feedback from university leaders
- Prepare materials and supplies for facilitator and presenters
- Prepare materials and supplies for all exercises and activities
- Determine who will play roles for each day's role play demonstration
- Event set up
  - Prepare event room (*possibly the day before the event*)
  - Confirm all technology is working properly
- Arrive early on first day of workshop
- Know your audience
  - Create a safe and supportive environment
  - Apply adult learner principles

### *Day 1*

The focus of the day is to understand the role that each stakeholder has in working to improve student retention.

- All participants will be given a name tag. The name tag will have the participant's name and their department.
- Tables will be assigned with a group name displayed on a table tent before individuals are seated. The group names will be Group A, Group B, Group C, and respectively until all tables have been assigned a group name. There will be

competitions within groups along with individual challenges. The competitions will be conducted throughout the 3-day workshop.

- Welcome video presentation – The subject of the video is about attending college. The title of the video is, *I Am Going to College Too*. The length of the video is 10 minutes. After the video, the facilitator and presenters will be introduced.
- Day 1 objectives explained.
- Opening activity – The purpose of the activity is so participants can get to know each other to allow the participants the opportunity to freely express themselves and not feel inhibited. This will help create a relaxed environment to promote collaborative dialogs. Encourage participants to share their experience and comments throughout the workshop.
- Student Presentation – What it is like to attend an HBCU. The participants will be encouraged to provide their thoughts after the presentation.
- *15-minute break following the presentation*
- Define retention
- Local site data
- Present research study findings
- Presentation – Defining “Student Persistence” / A group discussion will follow the presentation.

***1-hour lunch break***

- Presentation – Presentation by the university student support services department. A group discussion will follow the presentation.
- Presentation – Presentation by the university professional advising team. A group discussion will follow the presentation.
- *15-minute break following the presentation*
- Wrap up – Final thoughts and questions.
- Evaluation – At the end of the session, the participants will fill out a survey. Emphasize honest feedback on the evaluation so improvements can be made to

the workshop. Participants will be encouraged to submit questions to be addressed during the next day of the workshop.

### *Day 2*

The focus of the day is on understanding the theories of Vincent Tinto and John Bean, academic integration, advising, and academic support.

- Day 2 objectives explained.
- Opening activity – The activity will have the same goal as Day 1.
- Question and Answer Session – The facilitator will address any questions or reflections that were not answered or discussed at the end of Day 1.
- Presentation – The facilitator will discuss the theories of Vincent Tinto and John Bean.
  - Video presentation – The subject of the video is about Dr. Vincent Tinto, a professor at Syracuse University, discussing student retention and the need to foster learning environments where students succeed. The title of the video is *Promoting Student Success: A Shared Responsibility*. Tinto discusses the conditions that affect student success and strategies for assisting students to be successful. Participants will view the first 30 minutes of the video. A group discussion will follow the presentation.
- *15-minute break following the video*
  - Presentation – John Beans’ causal model of student attrition. The model provided the framework for this study to examine freshmen perceptions of student retention practices. A group discussion will follow the presentation.
- Role play demonstration – After the presentations, participants will be presented with a role-play demonstration displaying students being taught in a remote classroom and the pros and cons of remote learning, along with the challenges the students experienced with learning virtually.

- Student presentation – Students will express their concerns about finances and staying in school. A group discussion will follow the presentation.

### ***1-hour lunch break***

- Role play demonstration – Participants will have the opportunity to role play as students in a remote class setting using Microsoft Teams. This will allow the participants the opportunity to understand how the students feel when learning in a new and different environment other than a traditional classroom setting.
- Brainstorming – Participants will brainstorm in groups to produce ways to better implement practices for handling student challenges and improving student support to ensure that students are able to persist at VU.
- Gallery Walk – Participants will discuss in their groups about their possible solutions for improving student support. Groups will record their ideas on chart paper. Each group will post their chart around the room. At the conclusion of the walk, groups will present their ideas.
- Presentation – Student Financial Wellness and Financial Aid. A group discussion will follow the presentations.
- *15-minute break following the presentation*
- Wrap up – Final thoughts and questions.
- Evaluation – At the end of the session, the participants will fill out a survey. Emphasize honest feedback on the evaluation so improvements can be made to the workshop. Participants will be encouraged to submit questions to be addressed during the next day of the workshop.

### ***Day 3***

The focus for the final day will be social integration, learning communities, and ways that every department can socially integrate the students into the campus community.

- Day 3 objectives explained.
- Opening activity – Same goal as Day 1 and 2.

- Question and Answer session – Once the activity is concluded, the facilitator will address any outstanding questions from the previous day.
- Presentation – A presentation on social integration will be provided possibly by the Special Program and Campus Life Coordinator. A group discussion will follow the presentation.
- *15-minute break will be taken following the presentation.*
- Presentation – Possibly the Director of Residence Life and Campus Programming will discuss learning communities, campus programming, and the residence life curriculum. A group discussion will follow each presentation.

### ***1-hour lunch break***

- Brainstorming activity – Groups will brainstorm ways of integrating students into the social environment on campus, and not just in the residence halls.
- Gallery Walk – A gallery work presentation will be provided by each group.
- Wrap up – Final questions and reflections.
- Final evaluation – Participants will fill out the final evaluation. Emphasize honest feedback.

### Project Resources

- Video – I Am Going to College Too  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeaW\\_RNM91w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeaW_RNM91w)
- Video – Dr. Vince Tinto: Promoting Student Success: A Shared Responsibility  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20xv9V0OqUo>
- PowerPoint

PowerPoint Slides



**Purpose**

Because of the decline in freshmen student retention, the project is intended to provide a 3-day workshop of professional development activities related to persistence and retention at a local HBCU.

- Day 1 Objectives**
- Welcome and Introduction of Speakers
  - Video Presentation: *I am Going to College Too* (Created by Callie Head)
  - Opening Activity – *Pick That Role*
  - Student Presentation
    - Going to an HBCU
  - Define Retention
  - Local Site Data and Research Study Findings
  - Presentations and Discussions
    - Persistence
    - Student Support Services
    - Student Advising
  - Final Thoughts
  - Evaluation
- \* Please hand-in your own*



**Opening Activity – Pick That Role**

Faculty	President	Residential Life
Student Advising	Student Support Services	Campus Programming
Financial Aid	Administration	Alumni Association
Admissions	Student Services	Athletics
Information Technology		Academics Affairs



## What is Student Retention?

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An institution's ability to retain the first-time, full-time students from freshman year through the sophomore year. Ideally, the students will remain at the school and complete their degree (Aust et al., 2013; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

### 2017-18 Retention Rates

	First to second year retention rate – full-time students
Local HBCU	62%
National average (all institutions)	73.8%

### Graduation Rates

	Local HBCU	National Average
4-years	7%	35.8
6-years	12.2%	46.4
8-years	13.5%	47.8%


(National Center for Education Statistics, 2019)

### Research Study Findings

Data were obtained from freshman student interviews. The following themes and codes emerged from the data analysis:

- Freshmen rely on support systems to persist
  - Intactness with Faculty/Staff
  - Personal factors
- Social concerns influence persistence
  - Academic skills
  - Mentoring
  - Financial support
- External factors affect students' first year experience
  - COVID-19
  - Learning environment
  - HBCU campus experience

## Student Persistence



- Student's ability to remain enrolled at the same college each year until completion (Beowuag et al., 2018).
- Related to determining if a student will continue or discontinue with their courses (Rodgers, 2016).
- College student persistence is associated with students' involvement in college life (McMahaou, 2018; Zhou & Cole, 2017).

## Student Support Services

Overview of the SSS Program


Goal of SSS

Identification and selection of students

Types of SSS projects

Plan to deliver services

(Dorsch, 2016)



## Student Advising



Students who have clear academic and career goals are more apt to persist.

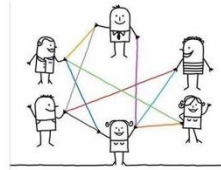
## Day 2 Objectives



- Opening Activity – *Do You Know Your Neighbor?*
- Questions from Day 1
- Presentation and Discussion
  - Vince Tinto and John Bean's Theories
- Role Playing – *Students and Participants*
- Presentations and Discussions
  - Student Financial Wellness
  - Financial Aid
- Brainstorming
- Gallery Walk – Participants
- Final Thoughts
- Evaluation

\* 1-hour lunch on your own

## Do You Know Your Neighbor?



Engaging With Your Group

## Knowing Each Other

"Won't You Be My Neighbor?" (play song by Mr. Rogers)  
MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD | "Won't You Be My Neighbor" Song | PBS KIDS – YouTube

- Each person introduce themselves to their partner group.
- Learn at least 2 things about each person in the group, to include their name and department.
- One person from each group will represent their group to provide an overview of what they learned about the members of their partner group (2-minute time limit)

\*\*\*Go Back to original seating area.\*\*\*

## Questions from Day 1

### Let Us Reflect



### Tinto and Bean Theories

The research of Tinto's Student Integration (1975, 1993) and Bean's Causal Model of Student Attrition (1980, 1982) provides the basis for the training. The theorists support the notion that involvement, or academic and social integration, is a primary condition for postsecondary student success.

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Tinto – Social Integration Model (Trenton et al., 2000; Tinto 1975, 1993)

- Provides a framework for understanding why students may not persist through to degree completion
- Social and academic integration are essential to student retention


Bean – Causal Model of Student Attrition (Bean 1980, 1982)

- Addresses factors presumed to affect the student's decision to depart from the college institution
- Model addresses four areas: dropout, satisfaction and institutional commitment, organizational determinants, and background variables

### Dr. Vince Tinto: Promoting Student Success: A Shared Responsibility




### Role Play Demonstration – Students



Role play of students being taught in a remote classroom to show the pros and cons of remote learning, along with the challenges the students experienced with learning virtually.

### Student Presentation – Financial Wellness




Students will express their concerns about staying in school and the importance of financial support. A group discussion will follow the presentation.

### Financial Aid Presentation and Discussion


- Availability and access to financial aid directly affects student persistence (American Institutes for Research (2017).
- Financial resources is one of the factors that help students stay in school.

### Role Play Demonstration – Participants




Participants will have the opportunity to role play as students in a remote classroom setting using Microsoft Teams.

### Brainstorming



### Gallery Walk Presentation



### Day 3 Objectives




- Opening Activity – *Fact or Fiction?*
- Questions from Day 2
- Presentations and Discussions
  - Social Integration
  - Residential Life
  - Campus Programming
- Brainstorming Activity
- Gallery Walk – Participants
- Final Thoughts
- Final Evaluation

\* 1-hour lunch on your own

### Fact or Fiction? HBCUs in the United States

HBCUs...

- Created to provide a structured higher education system for Black students
- Educate 1 in 10 of the nation's African American students
- Produce 13% of all African American graduates
- Conferred 48,300 degrees in 2017-18
- Fosters success through positive campus climate
- Enroll about 5 in 10 low-income, first generation students
- First HBCU established in 1937
- All HBCUs are the same







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**Professional Development Evaluation**

**Title of Activity** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date of Activity** \_\_\_\_\_

Please use the following rubric to evaluate this workshop. Your evaluation and comments will be used to improve the quality of instruction in future workshops.

Faculty/Administrators/Student Support Services Staff Experience:

0 – 5 years       6 – 10 years       11 – 15 years       16+ years

<b>Quality of the Workshop</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Content aligned with the institution's goals/objectives for student retention.				
Workshop was well planned and interactive.				
Content was relevant and useful.				
There was an effective use of materials. ( <i>PowerPoint, videos, handouts, and technology</i> )				
Timed agenda was sufficient to allow learning and practicing of new concepts.				
<b>Workshop Presentation</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Facilitator encouraged participation, collegiality, and professional collaboration.				
Presenters were knowledgeable about the content and were able to answer participants' questions.				
Presenters provided an appropriate level of support.				
Presenters were well prepared.				
Presenters respected the knowledge and professional experience of adult learners.				
<b>Results of the Training</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
I gained new information about the topic.				
Content was useful to my professional development.				
I feel confident about applying what I have learned.				

**What changes could be made to improve the quality of instruction?**

**What were some strengths of the session/workshop?**

**What additional support do you need to assist you in applying what you have learned?**

Adapted and modified March 2021 from oconeeschools.org

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### Background Questions

- Are you a freshman?
- What year did you begin as a freshman at Victory University (VU)?
- What is your major?
- Tell me about your family.
  - Are you the first to attend college?
  - Will you be the first to complete a degree?
  - When do you intend to graduate?

### HBCU Experience

1. Describe the climate at VU. *(Relevant to in-person learning only)*
  - a. What aspects of the campus climate please you the most?
  - b. What stood out as the defining characteristic of that experience?
  - c. What aspects of the campus climate please you the least?
  - d. What stood out as the defining characteristic of that experience?
2. What are your perceptions of VU's culture? Meaning, what is understood as the "VU" way of doing things?
  - a. How has the culture contributed to improving your academic experience?
  - b. Describe the interactions between peers and the interactions between faculty and students?
  - c. What is your most memorable interaction with a faculty/staff member?
  - d. Describe the effect the interaction had on your life?
3. To what extent was it important for you to be studying at an HBCU?
  - a. What were your expectations about VU prior to enrolling?
4. From your experience at VU, what are some of the primary factors that helped you persist to degree completion?
5. What experiences at VU reinforced your decision to persist toward your degree?
6. If you had an opportunity to restart your HBCU experience, what would you change and why?
7. How has your academic growth been supported at VU?
8. What factors do you think may cause you not to persist at VU?

9. To what extent did you entertain quitting and terminating your studies at VU?  
Why did you continue?
10. If you had an opportunity to restart your VU experience, what would you change and why?
11. While attending VU, what affect have interactions with faculty members had on you persisting toward your degree?
12. While attending VU, what impact have interactions with the support staff had on your persisting toward your degree?
13. To what extent did the VU campus environment and community support your persistence to degree completion?
14. While attending VU, what impacts have interactions outside of the VU community had on you persisting toward your degree?
15. From your personal perspective, who are your most significant supporters while you are pursuing your degree?
16. What specific role(s) did these support people play in your persisting to degree completion?

**Post Interview Comments and/or Observations:**

Before we conclude the interview, is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

**Student Interview Protocol**

Interviewee Code # \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee's e-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Post Interview Comments:

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## **Student Persistence Interviews**

### Introductory Protocol

#### Interviewer Script

Welcome, and thank you for your participation today. My name is Callie Herd. I am a graduate student at Walden University. You are here today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your persistence as a freshman at Victory University (VU; a pseudonym). The purpose of this study is to learn what influences an at-risk freshman student's decision to persist or leave college so that interventions related to positive change can be proposed. I aim to discover what factors led African American freshmen to persist in their first year of college.

The interview should last no longer than one hour. I will be asking several questions about how you persist at VU, along with what factors contributed to you persisting. You will also be asked to comment on how you view the colleges' role in helping students to persist.

So that you have the opportunity to respond to the questions fully, I may ask follow-up questions. If the time runs short, it may be necessary to extend your interview time to complete all the questions.

As a reminder, I will be tape-recording the interview, so I may accurately document the information you provide. If any question is unclear, please ask me to repeat or explain it to you. You can ask me to stop the recorder or stop the interview itself at any time during the interview process. Please feel free to let me know. You may withdraw your participation from the study at any time without consequence.

Do you have any questions or concerns? Then with your permission, I will begin the interview.