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Nontraditional, African American Women College Students' Lived Experiences

Cheryl Yvonne Jackson
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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Cheryl Y. Jackson

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

Nontraditional, African American Women College Students' Lived Experiences

by

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MS, Walden University, 2013

BA, University of Memphis, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

Nontraditional African American women continue seeking degrees in higher education graduating despite the challenges they face oftentimes displaying resilience in doing so. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of four nontraditional African American women college students. The theoretical foundation for this study was Garmezy's resilience theory. The theory capitalizes on the positive aspects or in this case protective factors which foster success in overcoming negative circumstances. This narrative, thematic analysis included data from in-depth interviews to identify key themes related to resilience to determine protective factors used by this population to succeed in college. The results show each participant relied on individual, familial, and environmental factors to pursue and achieve academic goals. Although, all protective factor themes had a perceived positive impact, individual characteristics such as perseverance, self-motivation, self-efficacy, and determination seemed to contribute to the participant's academic success. The results of this research study should be used as a guide to assist individuals, communities, and universities in assisting nontraditional African American women college students in their higher education pursuit by increasing awareness of existing resilience skills and providing insight into the protective factors that foster positive social change through academic outcomes.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to the memory of my one and only daughter Ashley Elaine Jackson who passed January 13, 2007. She had done great things in this world during her short life. The compassion and love she showered on everyone she came in contact with lives on. There has never been nor will there ever be another one as precious as ASHLEY ELAINE JACKSON. Everything I have accomplished since her death and will do until my own is for the kingdom of GOD and in her cherished memory. Also dedicated to Joe and Bertha Townsend, and Brussell and Mrs Curry Sr. my grandparents.

To my mother, it has always been me and you! Thank you for loving me when it was hard, Thank you for sacrificing for me when it was hard, Thank you for being you no matter who I was (LOL). There are not any words I can say that would adequately express how much I LOVE, RESPECT, ADMIRE, and DEPEND on you. I am so very PROUD to be your daughter. There is nobody else like you and there never will be.

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My sisters – Mia L. Curry-Pinkney and Annette C. Townsend

Joe and Donna Townsend

Mamie and James Nicolson

Carol and Odel Thompson

Hayward and Barbara Townsend

Richard Townsend

The ENTIRE Townsend Family

QTPis' (Angelique, Arvinia, Beverly, Carla, Chanda, Dionne, Karen, Lisa,

Natasha, Octavia, Sheila, Sybil, and Tajuana)

Dr. Weinbaum

Dr. McPhaul

Walden University

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The nontraditional college student population has been growing in the United States, especially since the COVID-19 Pandemic. The National Center for Education Statistics recorded approximately 15 million students enrolled in colleges and universities as degree-seeking in 2022; 2 million of those were African American (NCES, 2022). While enrollment for African Americans remains steady, their 4-year graduation rate is half of their White counterparts'. How to improve this gap is an ongoing concern (Griffin et al., 2022). It necessitates further exploration of best practices and experiences of African American students who are reenrolling and ultimately graduating from college. Determining and highlighting best practices and lived experiences of African Americans who have successfully graduated from college is an area worthy of exploration.

Overall, women make up most students who enroll and graduate from college. In cohort 2020-2021, 129,000 women receiving a bachelor's degree were African American while 649,922 were white. According to NCES (2022), the number of African American women graduating with a bachelor's degree has not significantly improved in the last 20 years. In contrast African American women continue making significant strides, with regards to enrolling in colleges and universities. One specific group of African American women has shown a steady increase. They are classified as nontraditional. These independent students over 25 years old, with family, employment, and other obligations continue reenrolling and graduating from college. Specific to this research study, the National Center for Research Statistics (2021) reported that Walden University had an equal percentage of African American and White students at 38% and 89% of those are

over the age of 25 years. Why nontraditional African American college students select Walden, while balancing academic and nonacademic demands prompts this research study.

Traditionally, postsecondary options were limited to just traditional campuses. While students were not required to live on campus, all classes were held and attended in person on campus. In the late 1980s a new type of classroom emerged and included classes with students participating both in person and online or distance learning options (Flinders et al., 2015). As of the early 2020s, there are approximately 62 colleges and universities offering online classes exclusively (IPEDS, 2021). Of these colleges in 2020 most online learners selected to enroll in private for-profit institutions programs possibly due to the pandemic (IPEDS, 2021). Of the students enrolled, Whites and Hispanics represented the largest percent. African Americans students ranked third in all schools accept private for-profit where they are second only to White students in enrollment at 28% which is double their number in both 4-year private nonprofit and public colleges (NCES, 2020). Walden University appears to have captured what is needed to improve graduation rates for nontraditional African American women students as they rank second only to White women to receive a degree. Further exploration of factors that increase graduation rates should be researched.

Adding to this research need is the rising trend in women heads of households (Goodman et al., 2021). Women now represent approximately half the heads of households reported and African American women represent more than 60% of this number (Goodman et al., 2021). Having the responsibility for one's household leads to

the need to increase income and family stability. A postsecondary education remains a viable option to support a change financially and socially for families (Forster et al., 2021). Tuzemen (2021) noted that women without a college degree had a significant time recovering from the effects of labor during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Graduating from college may positively affect the chances of financial stability. While many researchers have studied what impedes graduation rates, it has been proposed that future research focus on positive experiences and resiliency of those who continue to persevere and graduate (Fourtane, 2021; Griffin, 2022; McGuire, 2020). Exploring the driving forces of those who do stay the course and graduate from college could provide essential information valuable to the development of strategies necessary to address factors that attribute to nontraditional African American women and their graduating from college.

This study explores the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students. It specifically focuses on the challenges affecting their retention and graduation in higher education. The study will highlight resilience concepts shared by nontraditional African American women colleges students. The study will add to the already growing literature on positive aspects related to protective factors employed by nontraditional African American women college students promoting understanding of the factors that enable resilience and academic success among this population of student.

Using these conversations will expand knowledge of resilience concepts utilized for continued academic success in this student demographic. The study has important social change implications. By identifying factors that promote resilience and academic

success in nontraditional African American women students, institutes of higher learning can develop or improve support services tailored to this population. These enhanced services could help increase retention and graduation rates for these students. The underrepresentation of nontraditional African American women in higher education, makes this study necessary to provide insights that could inform practices aimed at empowering more students from this demographic to successfully complete college. This first-hand knowledge will prove invaluable as it can be used in support of programs assisting nontraditional African American women college students. The social change implications of this study also include increased self-efficacy. Nontraditional African American women college students exposed to and utilizing protective factors and other resilience concepts will be able to draw on these skills when faced with adversity later in life.

Background

In the most recent reporting year the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported only 11% of students who obtained a 4-year, undergraduate degree between 2019 to 2021 were African American women over 25 years of age. In contrast more than 55% of White male students earned an undergraduate degree. Fourtane (2021), noted African American women have made significant strides in higher education but there remains significant work to be done to assist in improving their college graduation rates. Past research focused on defining nontraditional students, their unique needs in college, their academic successes, and other challenges they face (Braund et al. 2020; Ebanks et al. 2023; Morris-Compton et al. 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023). There is limited

research on the resilience of nontraditional African American women college students, specifically what skills are used by this demographic to persist and graduate.

There are few researchers who have sought to focus on the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students. There are even fewer who have focused on positive influences, highlighting successes of nontraditional African American women college students. This study will capture narratives of these students, identifying positive influences and resilience techniques used that facilitate their retention and graduation.

Struggling to complete a college degree at times feels like a daunting task (Witkowsky et al., 2018). For those already struggling for financial survival, a postsecondary education may seem a necessary means to changing current and long-term circumstances (Gault et al., 2020; Storlie et al., 2018). African American women have faced educational adversity in the past but keep facing those challenges head on. To achieve the goals they set for themselves African American women are proving their resilience in family, work, and educational obtainment. There is still little research to capture what resilience skills or systems nontraditional African American women students rely on for strength in aiding in their retention and graduation (Morales, 2008; Rothes et al., 2022; & Witkowsky et al., 2018).

The concept of resilience developed during early research studies interested in a parent's mental illness effects on their children (Cicchetti et al., 1993; Shean, 2015). Why some children seemed unaffected by a parent's mental illness became an area necessitating further research. Later studies highlighted resilience associated with

poverty, lower socioeconomic status and even children whose parents were involved in criminal activity (Oehme et al., 2019). The outcome was defined as resilience. Resilience was defined as the ability to recover after compressive stress (Cicchetti et al., 1993). It is important to note that compressive is not ordinary stressors, but those challenges that are perceived to be more harmful or debilitating. Garmezy, known as the founder of resilience, would lead the charge to explore positive aspects that lead to adaptive coping with the aid of protective factors (Hargraves, 2019; Masten et al., 2012).

In 2019, this work has continued. Unger (2019) continued to address the need for research attributes that maintain resilience, including the ability to overcome adversity with positive influences to achieve a desired outcome. These characteristics are also important in academics.

In the realm of higher education, one may classify those extraordinary challenges as bad or failing grades, negative experiences with faculty, staff, or peers, and even a racial minority status (Kundu, 2019; Tope-Banjoko et al., 2020). Other challenges could also include a lack of support from family or a student's lack of self-efficacy (Leggins, 2021). When exposed to these stressors the reaction influences the ability to keep going, continuing to reenroll until graduation. Factors assisting in a positive trajectory are often referred to as protective in nature (Braund et al., 2020; Shean, 2015). Protective factors are those mitigating factors that influence positive outcomes when faced with adverse situations or extreme stressors. They include internal, familial, or external, and systems support (Shean, 2015). It is important to point out the need to face challenges for resilience to develop and occur. This idea is supported by the work of Morales, Masten,

and Ungar, all of which support the idea of protective factors with regard to building resilience (Blankson et al., 2019; Datzler et al., 2022).

Past literature discusses resilience and its relationship to higher education but reiterates the need for further research. Studies (Griffin et al., 2022; Kara, 2019; Price, 2022; Rothes et al., 2021; Warren et al., 2021; & Xiao et al., 2022) highlighted the need to focus on specific sets of students and their resilience practices. Distance learning strategies, acquiring basic needs, general resilience constructs developed by diverse groups, and exploration of different populations of nontraditional students and low-income students who develop supports have been studied previously and are all listed in the studies as a need for further exploration. Kara (2019) specifically mentions direct interviews for future research rather than utilizing existing data which is a method chosen by this research project. Past studies highlighted the need for future research on positive attributes including factors that offset challenges in higher education, insights from actual students related to their resilience, and an enhanced focus on students who are also working while in college as necessary to contribute to future literature (de Oliveira Durso et al., 2021; Masten et al., 2021; Price, 2022; Widjaja et al., 2021; Witteveen et al., 2021; & Xiao et al., 2022).

Experiences of nontraditional, African American women college students has influenced recent dissertations and other studies. A major difference in studies is the focus on the positive aspects. Researchers want to know how some nontraditional African American women students succeed in college. This is an area necessary for further research. Nnanna (2022) noted, future researchers should emulate the study at a different

college or university and highlight experiences and supportive factors. In a dissertation, Rhone (2023) proposed that future research should focus on African American single mothers' experiences with student support services and how those services influence academic decisions. It has also been suggested by Ebanks et al. (2023) that further examination is needed to understand why some African American women college students persist and enroll in 4-year-institutions while others do not.

In addition, Griffin et al. (2022) described the decline in 6-year, graduation rates of Blacks compared to Whites since 2002 and the need to explore colleges and universities who successfully retain and graduate Black students. This study will incorporate previous study future recommendations to obtain information vital to fostering resilience in nontraditional African American women college students.

As mentioned, colleges and universities have long been thought of as an avenue for upward social and economic mobility; however, it has not always been accessible to everyone (Cigledi et al., 2022; Fourtane, 2021; Tuzemen, 2021). Historically, African American women have been educationally oppressed despite their capabilities. Fortunately, postsecondary education is available and more readily accessible. Morales and others suggest protective factors mostly influence positive outcomes (Morales, 2010; 2014).

Many researchers suggest that continued focus on students who persevere is warranted. Exploring students' perseverance may provide information to aid in assisting college stakeholders in the development of programs or strategies to assist in the improvement of graduation rates for nontraditional students. In addition, the information

may also promote the need for continued research on the aspects of resilience, risks, protective factors, and their relationship to a successful college outcome (Blankson et al., 2019; Gault et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

The issue of nontraditional, African American women students' college graduation completion rate prompted this study. According to NCES enrollment for 2019 was over 26 million (NCES, 2020). Of the 26 million 3,293,942 were African American (NCES, 2020). For those seeking to improve their socioeconomic status a bachelor's degree or higher remains a viable option (Hanson, 2021). For many years obtaining a college degree has been synonymous with income potential (Horowitz, 2018). With that in mind single-parent African American households may choose this path to lift their families out of poverty and impress upon future generations to do the same (Kundu, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics summarized that in six years, approximately 60 percent of students who enroll in college will graduate with a bachelor's degree from a four-year college (NCES, 2021). While it may be acceptable for over half of the students who begin their bachelor's to graduate, it should be noted African American students earn those degrees at a significantly lower rate.

Of African Americans who attend college, approximately 25% do not earn a degree (NCES, 2018). Of the 5 million students who graduated in 2020, a little over 500,000 were African American (NCES, 2020). Asian, White, and Hispanics graduate at greater rates than African Americans from public four colleges (Causey et al., 2020).

There is a need for improvement in graduation percentages for African American students who start but do not complete college.

Literature focused on factors that aid in the resilience of nontraditional African American women college students are limited. In the past, research limitations have included a lack of exploration into resources that assist or are labeled as protective, the positive or successful outcomes of at-risk populations, and reflection on what students are currently experiencing and when (Luthar et al., 2000; Morales, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014). Since 2015, researchers have pointed towards a need to study obstacles as well as successes, specific factors that influence resilience and persistence, and exploration of students who have changed academic demographic locations (ACT, 2015; Booker 2016; Chrysikos et al., 2017; Ungar, 2018). Even more recently, future research focus areas include promoting resilience and persistence interventions, challenges faced by adult learners, using a qualitative approach to determine coping mechanisms, struggles, and successes of academic journeys to foster understanding (Bogden et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2020; Kara et al., 2019; Karmelita, 2020; Kundu, 2019; Mushonga et al., 2020; Robbins et al., 2018; Witkowsky et al., 2018).

African American students who are applying, enrolling, and attending college should have the opportunity to graduate. For students who start but do not finish college that could mean a lifetime of indebtedness and low socioeconomic status (McGuire, 2020). Not graduating from college could contribute to a significant loss in income for families over their lifespan (Long, 2018). There is a significant gap in the percentage of graduates among African American students, and this disparity may be attributed to a

lack of resilience (Tope-Banjoko et al., 2020). Understanding the experiences and resilience skills of those who do obtain academic success and graduate is imperative to the future of women African American college graduation rates (Oehme et al., 2019).

While past literature has explored various challenges and barriers faced by nontraditional African American women college students, there remains a gap in understanding the specific resilience skills and strategies used by those who do persist and graduate despite obstacles. Few studies have focused directly on identifying the protective factors and lived experiences that enable academic success among nontraditional African American women from their own perspectives. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the narratives of nontraditional African American women college students who despite obstacles have demonstrated resilience unearthing and applying positive influences and techniques that facilitate their retention and graduation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional, African American women college students and identify skills that are used to contribute to their retention and increased graduation rates. Previous research suggested studying interventions that promote resilience and found that understanding experiences may foster academic achievement (Brogden et al., 2019; Kundu, 2019). Through interviews, this research study provided a platform for nontraditional African American women college students to highlight experiences with motivation, persistence, coping strategies and other positive influences that aid in retention and graduation. Allowing nontraditional African American women students to share lived experiences provided insight into their

ability to overcome adversity and expose their challenges. The information obtained can also influence changes that positively impact other students' experiences including their ability to stay the course (Cotton et al., 2017).

Research Question

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional, African American women college students and what are resilience skills that contribute to their retention and graduation from college?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

In the early 1990s, Garmezy studied the factors that positively influenced children of mentally ill parents. Realizing that some children appeared to be negatively affected while others were not, he became curious which led to the discovery of positive influences acting as buffers (Shean, 2015). These influences, now known as protective factors, have since been highlighted in other works such as Masten (2009) and Morales (2010). Both authors expounded on protective factors and their positive influence, which aided in overcoming adversity. Morales' (2010) resilience model focused specifically on risk and protective factors associated with academic achievement. Focusing on students' stories provided information in the participants own words that allowed for the formation of themes and clusters known as protective factors and how they aided in the building of resilience skills (Morales, 2008; 2010).

Resilience has been described as the ability to overcome adversity (Shean, 2015). In Shean's (2015) comparative article definitions of resilience include descriptive words such as recover, overcome, adapt, and cope with regards to moving past adversity.

Likewise, in a subsequent work by Unger (2019), the definition included the ability to seek out and utilize resources to maintain. An unexpected grade on an assignment, feeling unsupported or out of place, and lack of finances have impeded retention and graduation for African Americans (Akeman, 2019; Parsons, 2017). Like Garmezy's early work, Morales became curious about successes despite adversity in academics. Morales' (2014) use of resilience focused on why some students achieve their academic goals despite adversity while others do not. Garmezy's early contribution focused on children achieving or overcoming despite their circumstances while others failed to do so, this later became known as resilience (Luthar, 2003). Garmezy's original resilience work focused on functioning despite circumstances (Shean, 2015). A resilience framework is appropriate as it focuses on how individuals overcome (Shean, 2015).

The Garmezy model used for this study is the protective versus vulnerability model and is inclusive of individual, family, and support factors (Shean, 2015). Students' opportunity to share experiences is important to gain insight into how they overcome or maintain to subsequently persevere, an important step towards positive social change for vulnerable populations (Shean, 2015). Chapter 2 will address the theoretical orientation in more detail.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative narrative research design. Norton et al. (2020) noted that a narrative approach provides the opportunity for insight of the participants, which allows for deeper conversation and sharing of experiences. The approach provided nontraditional, African American women college students a platform to identify stressors

and how those were mitigated or overcome to continue their goal towards college graduation. I recruited nontraditional African American women college students via social media and Walden University's participant pool for individual interviews. They were at least 25 years old and classified as independent status (meaning no one lists them as dependent for tax purposes). Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants. As of fall 2020, 88 % of Walden University students were 25 years of age or older, and of those 33% were African American. The participants were asked to participate in an audio conference via Zoom.

The data included student responses to open-ended interview questions regarding nontraditional African American women college students' relationship with adversity and their knowledge of and applying of resilience concepts to improve their chances of graduating from college.

Definitions

The following are definitions important to this study:

Institute of Education Sciences (IES): Institute of Education Sciences (<https://ies.ed.gov/>).

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022).

Nontraditional Students: For the purposes of this study nontraditional students are 25 years of age or older, have dependents of their own, work and have a household they are responsible for (Rawlston-Wilson et al., 2014; Rothes et al., 2022).

Protective Factors: Protective factors are those positive influences and supports that aid in assisting in overcoming adversity (Shean, 2015; Morales, 2008; 2010).

Risk Factors: Risk factors are barriers or challenges that may negatively impact a person or situation (Shean, 2015; Morales 2010; 2011;).

Nontraditional or Distance Learning or Online education: Campuses where no students attend class in person, no students live on campus in housing or dorms (Todri et al., 2021).

Traditional Students: Traditional students are those who enroll and attend college immediately after high school, dependent on parents or guardians for necessities, are carried as dependent on a tax return, and have no dependents of their own (Leggins, 2021; Rothes et al., 2022).

Assumptions

Sharing life experiences can be difficult. Admitting challenges is sometimes viewed as weak by African American women who are often seen as strong and the backbone of their family. Participants were asked to discuss challenges and triumphs. Both proved to be imperative to this research. I assumed students would discuss what may be seen as vulnerabilities or failures. I assumed students would identify positive influences. I assumed participants would be honest and freely discuss their higher education experiences. I also assumed students would remember past relationships with other institutes of higher learning. Lastly, I assumed students would recall experiences with adversity, reasons they continued to pursue a degree and factors that provided support to achieve their postsecondary goals.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was nontraditional African American women students at Walden University who are actively enrolled or have recently graduated. Additional characteristics assist in defining them as nontraditional. These students must be 25 years of age or older and have nonacademic obligations. Employment status, dependents, and a household to maintain will be considered as nonacademic obligations. I am studying this group because there are gaps in the literature related to their narratives associated with lived experiences of their resilience and its positive attributes.

Also, traditional students were excluded from this study. Traditional students are classified as being under the age of 25 years old, and not considered independent (dependent on parent or guardian for most or all support). There have been several studies focused on 1st time full-time students, their successes and what institutions of higher learning implement to contribute to their successes. Those contributions may not assist in the graduation rate of nontraditional African American women college students. The resilience theory developed by Garmezy allowed the study's focus to be on positive attributes shared by participants.

Limitations

A potential barrier when collecting primary data included difficulty recruiting participants for interviews and subsequent coding for analysis. I ensured a clear separation of my role at the institution from my role as researcher could also be a challenge. Initially, the findings of this research would be limited to the population at Walden University and would not apply to other colleges or universities if only those

students were allowed to participate, however; this changed with careful consideration from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study was interview-based and noted to be the student's perception of their experiences. I was not able to control the level of honesty or their feelings during interviews or interactions. In addition, I was unable to control whether participants completed the process to include follow-up interviews.

Significance

This study provided firsthand information on the lived experiences of women African American college students between the ages of 25 years and older. The results of this study should assist future students in identifying positive influences, considered protective factors, to aid in the development and application of resilience and persistence in overcoming challenges when working towards obtaining a college degree. The study can contribute to the understanding of how, despite complex barriers to completing a degree, nontraditional African American women students push through to continue reenrolling and ultimately graduating. By exploring these experiences via a narrative approach stakeholders can familiarize themselves with the challenges faced by nontraditional African American women students that may impede their graduation. In doing so colleges and universities may choose to implement programs or strategies geared toward the mitigation of barriers or risks to retention and graduation. Achieving a college degree may positively impact nontraditional African American women college student lives, including financial stability, self-efficacy, and continued resilience skill building.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore lived experiences with a focus on the positive aspects. This study will highlight nontraditional African American women students and how they overcome adversity associated with their pursuit to obtain a college degree. The goal of this study was to provide an avenue for these students to share experiences in their own words. Institutes of higher learning can use information from this study to examine current practices when relating to these students' needs. Specifically, Walden University can capitalize on the positive aspects of these occurrences, ensuring current practices are maintained and building on their successes. Lastly, the ability to help those who want a college degree to obtain one is monumental. Social change is driven by providing avenues to promote positive outcomes.

Chapter 2 will discuss literature review strategies, theoretical foundation, and components, resilience frameworks in higher education, participant-specific characteristics, and gaps in the literature. It has been pointed out that research struggles to mention positive aspects of nontraditional African American women students in-depth and that much of the focus depicts struggles and challenges with graduation and retention in postsecondary education (Mehmet et al., 2019; Putwain et al., 2020). This research will mention the risks associated with graduating but will also point out what students have done and continue to do in their efforts to obtain a bachelor's degree (Milovanska-Farrington, 2020).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this research study, the focus was on nontraditional, African American women college students and their lived experiences. Exploring these experiences and resilience skills in academic success is imperative to the future of nontraditional African American women's college graduation rates (Oehme et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore and identify skills that are utilized to contribute to their retention and increased graduation rates. College continues to be an avenue by which African Americans can improve their lives (McGuire, 2020; Quadlin et al., 2021). Although the importance of a postsecondary degree remains a topic of debate (Cappelli, 2020; McGuire, 2020; Quadlin et al., 2021), data show higher earnings for those who possess a college degree.

According to the Education Data Initiative (2022), students who attend college but do not graduate earn approximately 48.4% less than those who successfully obtain a bachelor's degree. By obtaining a college degree, individuals improve their financial outcomes and their ability to provide for their families and are more marketable when applying for employment (Milovanska-Farrington, 2020). African American women accounted for approximately 13% of all students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 2020-2021, ranking as the fourth highest race/gender combination to enroll (NCES, 2021). This percentage is pertinent because African American women were one of the last groups allowed to seek an education in the United States (Fourtane', 2021). However, there remains a significant gap in graduation rates (Eller et al., 2018; Long,

2018), with African American women ranked 8 out of 9 in reported races in graduation obtainment within 6 years of enrollment for the cohort year 2015 (NCES, 2021).

In this study, I focused on nontraditional, African American women students' lived experiences when pursuing an undergraduate degree. Traditional college undergraduates are 18 to 24 years old, dependent on their parents, and have a high school diploma (Leggins, 2021). Nontraditional students are 25 years of age or older, legally independent of their parents, and often are full-time employees (Rawlston-Wilson, 2014).

Nontraditional students have additional responsibilities to consider, unlike many traditional students. Those considerations include family, household, and work obligations (Phillips, 2021). Approximately one-third of nontraditional students are parents (Gault et al., 2020). These students may encounter familial strains, including inadequate housing, income, and assistance with childcare. Other barriers to degree completion include the ability to assimilate within the postsecondary student population which may also be a source of added stress (Porter et al., 2021). The National Urban League's executive summary noted that more than 60% of African American college students were of independent status in 2011-2012 (Rawlston-Wilson, 2014).

The experiences of these students and how they overcome challenges to stay in and ultimately graduate from college is a worthy topic of investigation (Forster et al., 2021). Exploring the experiences of nontraditional African American women students, the challenges they face, and their ability to overcome these challenges is important because it may provide insight that stakeholders can use to increase this group's retention and graduation rates ultimately contributing to social equality (Kara et al., 2021; Leggins,

2021). Doing so is also important because, once students are accepted into college, it may negatively affect already strained finances if students do not graduate. This may be even more concerning for nontraditional students. Degree completion importance has been further reiterated, after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which showed African American women have struggled to financially rebound, Tuzeman (2021) noted. Further exploration of African American woman students' specific barriers and needs may assist college and university leaders in channeling resources that may enhance the chances of higher education completion (Parsons, 2017).

Researchers have continued to focus on retention and graduation rates in college. Colleges have seen a rise in adult learners now being classified as nontraditional, returning to college for their degree. What is unique about the new literature is the interest in how nontraditional students manage to stay in college despite their nonacademic obligations (Braund et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023). Researchers are highlighting the resilience of students and adding to the literature by providing much needed information for programs development and processes to help those who want a degree to earn one.

Nguyen et al. (2023), studied nontraditional African American women in community college. The research sought to investigate several aspects of the students' experiences rather than focusing on one. A focus on more than one characteristic of these students led to the name neotraditional rather than nontraditional. The neotraditional nomenclature considers other individual characteristics of the student. The research determined that a classification of student should not just center around a person's age

but other characteristics such as part-time enrollment, full-time employment, and parenting status. This study fostered the need to consider all aspects of an individual, not just academics.

In a qualitative case study by Braund et al. (2022), seven mothers were interviewed about their experiences in college. The study noted an increase in the number of mothers enrolled in college and the lack of information on parenting status. Lack of parenting information hampers program development which may positively affect school attendance and graduation rates. The study reiterated the increasing number of single parents in college who find a way to attend despite challenges of their nonacademic obligations. This study again focused on not only their barriers but highlighted the positive aspects of their time in college. Through semistructured interviews, the mothers shared strong relationships with other students, improved self-efficacy, and a positive effect on their children developed because of them staying in college until they graduated.

Ebanks et al. (2023) took a different approach in an exploration of African American female students in community colleges. Using a quantitative approach, the study focused on what impacts persistence of African American female students. It was noted that nontraditional African American female students continue enrolling but fall short of graduating. Using the critical race feminism, framework the study identified academic support and finances are predictors of experience. The more support an African American nontraditional female student receives the more likely they are to stay in college and graduate.

In recent dissertations, I noted protective factors are important to the successful retention and graduation of nontraditional students (Nnanna, 2022; Rhone, 2022). Mothers listed a major concern with balancing their work, family, and educational obligations. Nnanna (2022) and Rhone (2022) noted, protective factors such as family and school support had a positive impact on the retention and graduation of these students. Like this study, Nnanna (2022) and Rhone (2022) sought to add to the literature of nontraditional students experiences to aid stakeholders in retention and graduation rates. In this chapter, I reviewed key literature on higher education frameworks and barriers to retention and graduation for African American women. I also describe the literature search strategy and discuss the study's theoretical orientation.

Literature Search Strategy

The Walden University Library, Google Scholar, and the University of Memphis Library databases were both utilized to gather literature and statistics. Those databases included PsycINFO, ERIC, EBSCOhost, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Thoreau, Sage Knowledge, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. Keywords included *teaching, higher education, community health needs assessments, social determinants of health, African American/Blacks freshman, motivation, intro to psychology classes, growth mindset, psychology, adverse childhood experiences, average student, seeking higher education, protective factors, resilience, promotive factors, buffer, minority college students, attrition, retention, dropout, racial minority college students, bills, policies, laws, Black students, college education, college completing, narrative, benefits of college,*

significance of college, college graduates, older college students, Black college experiences, non-traditional student, resilience theory, founder of resilience theory, Norman Garmezy, Norman Garmezy students, proteges, Ann Masten, cognitive emotional, distance learning, academic resilience, academic resilience evolved over time, history/background/past of resilience theory, adult learner, storytelling, qualitative inquiry, D. Jean Clandinin, Michael Connelly, and narrative inquiry.

Theoretical Foundation

Resilience

The idea of resilience is not a new concept. As early as 1955, the term *resilience* was used in relation to a longitudinal study of children living in poverty in Hawaii (Johnson et al., 2004). The study culminated in five publications and determined that one-third of its participants overcame the challenging conditions of their childhood, which included poverty for all participants and for others, parental discourse, and no running water (Johnson et al., 2004; Luthar, 2000). The results determined childhood adversity has long-term negative health and developmental implications (Johnson et al., 2004; Richardson et al., 2018).

In addition, later years saw resilience defined in the realm of child psychiatry to expose how some children produced positive outcomes despite their complex adversity with regard to familial and environmental circumstances. In an article by Shean 2015, several theorists as well as professors of higher education's definitions, concepts, and implications, were shared. The illuminated article concepts included one's ability to overcome or adapt in the face of extreme adversity. The article clarified the need for

adversity in resilience skill building (Shean, 2015). Clinical psychologist Norman Garmezy, mentioned in Shean's article as the founder of resilience research, pointed to the idea of stress as a catalyst for resilience. Masten et al. (1990) described resilience as a process. In this process, individuals adapt to adverse circumstances to produce positive results.

The ability to fight through or keep going even when it does not seem possible is the essence of being resilient. Resilience is an important concept to assist individuals in helping overcome tragedy, or other adverse experiences (Cotton et al., 2017). Masten (2016) shared that resilience is the ability to adapt when the outcome seems bleak. Other definitions include the ability of individuals or systems to achieve when others have failed given the same environment or abilities and the ability to overcome obstacles and move forward to achieve a goal (Brogden et al., 2019; Morales et al., 2004; Robbins et al., 2018; Shean, 2015). Explanations include the idea of resilience manifesting when faced with stress and other adverse situations. Transitioning has occurred in resilience research, and the focus has included its application in academia (Masten et al., 2008; Masten et al., 2021; Oehme et al., 2019; Widjaja et al., 2021). The focus is not on the trauma but on the idea of protective factors. Protective factors include one nurturing adult, caregiver, or at least one person or entity providing strength and or a reason to persevere (Davidson et al., 2020; Morales, 2010; Shean, 2015).

Resilience Theory

The framework for this research study is resilience theory. Resilience theory was initially used in researching mental illness and its outcomes on patients and their families

(Henderson, 2020; Shean, 2015). Resilience has been described as the ability to overcome adversity to achieve positive outcomes (Morales, 2010, 2014; Shean, 2015). Coping, positively adapting, withstanding, and recovering from adversity are all terms associated with resilience frameworks and theories (Cotton et al., 2017; Morales, 2010; Shean, 2015). In the study of resilience, authors noted the lack of research focused on positive attributes rather than the common themes of negative outcomes (Morales, 2014; Shean, 2015).

An important figure in this work is Garmezy, who began his work with resilience in the mental health field. Garmezy worked with children of parents diagnosed with a mental illness to determine the impact on those children versus children with no parent with a mental health diagnosis (Hanson, 2012; Shean, 2015). As a result of the initial research, Garmezy became interested in the specifics that positively influenced outcomes. It became the early work to identify and focus on positive influences (Hanson, 2012; Shean, 2015). Since that time, the resilience paradigm has become an invaluable resource in other arenas as well, such as higher education (Shean, 2015). There are always going to be challenges, barriers, or obstacles; what is important is how people handle or overcome when things do not go as expected (Robbins et al., 2018).

Resilience theory posits overcoming is the essence of resilience. Resilience indicates protective factors have mitigated risks to create a positive outcome (Shean, 2015). It is influential in this project and the discovery of how students on the path to success in higher education overcome adverse situations, persist, and ultimately graduate.

Garnezy Resilience Theory

Garnezy initially developed his theory while working with families with mentally ill parents. The idea was to observe the differences in children in those households and those where the parents were not mentally ill. Curiosity arose during early research, and as a result, 'Project Competence' was launched (Shean, 2015). During this project, in addition to children of people with schizophrenia, a comparison was made to children referred by school personnel recommended based on their own diagnoses, which included conduct disorder, over-inhibited, or hyperactivity (Shean, 2015). The results indicated there were some yet-discovered factors blocking risks, as evidenced by some students thriving despite adversity. These became known as protective factors (Shean, 2015). Norman Garnezy's aspects of discovery consisted of positive and negative influences (Shean, 2015).

His curiosity piqued, Garnezy sought to focus on competence rather than an abnormal or maladaptive adjustment to adversity (Henderson, 2020; Shean, 2015). He would go on to identify supportive elements during this time and deduce that the surrounding environments of children influenced their stress levels and performance (Hanson, 2012; Henderson, 2020). He continued this work over the years with colleagues and students, evolving the idea of resilience in psychopathology (Masten et al., 2021).

Garnezy was instrumental in the collaboration of several disciplines and cross-training of students. Professions contributing to resilience research include child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, developmental psychologists, professors, social workers, and family therapists (Masten et al., 2012). Identification of supportive elements

resulted during these studies. Those elements were grouped as individual, familial, and other support factors (Luthar et al., 2000; Shean, 2015). Individual elements are those internal and include IQ, motivation, and self-efficacy. Familial elements consist of influences including nurturing parents or other family members, divorce, and even inadequate housing. Support elements are considered external to home life and include schools and school personnel, counselors, or work peer groups (Masten et al., 2008). Understanding these protective influences became the focus.

A culmination of several adverse interactions is known as risk factors and may include legal issues, familial instability, health challenges, inadequate housing, and poverty, to name a few (Masten, 2009; Masten et al., 1990; Masten et al., 2008). In addition to risk factors becoming evident in this research, protective factors also arose. Protective factors include those elements that buffer adversity for the individual and may include a nurturing adult, problem-solving ability, and internal motivation (Johnson et al., 2004; Morales, 2010). The identification of elements and models developed due to Garmezy's research (Shean, 2015). Both risk and protective factors are categorized into individual, familial, and support factors (Henderson, 2020; Shean, 2015). Lower risk and higher protective factors contribute to resilience, as evident by structures associated with Garmezy's model.

The three models included in Garmezy's research are compensatory, protective versus vulnerability, and a challenge model (Shean, 2015). The compensatory model is present when a risk lowers competence, and a positive factor compensates to produce resilience. It is seen as the protective factor adding to the situation to produce resilience.

The protective versus vulnerability model requires stress and a positive trait to interact to produce resilience.

Lastly, the challenge model produces results and may be seen as a positive influence. The idea is that there will always be stress, and it is important to develop coping skills and resources known as protective factors to assist long-term as other risks occur (Shean, 2015). The models and elements work together to explain the necessity to develop resilience that will inevitably assist individual efforts in withstanding pressures and adversity long term.

As mentioned earlier, professionals have been influenced by Garmezy's teachings as well as his work to establish integral facets of resilience. Garmezy would also influence the next generations of scholars in child psychiatry, clinical psychologists, developmental psychologists, professors, as well as social workers and therapists who would share work beneficial to resilience. Of those students influenced, Cicchetti et al., (1993) Luthar et al., (2000), and Masten (2003) would address and have been cited in resilience work to include several articles as well as contributing research (Hanson et al., 2021; Herrman et al., 2011; Luthar et al., 2007). As a result of his impact, Garmezy is known as the founder of resilience.

Masten et al. (1990) expounded on resilience outcomes, sustainment, and recovery after training with Garmezy. These phenomena developed as the result of continued focused efforts on children's responses to challenges. In this process, individuals adapt to adverse circumstances to produce positive results (Masten et al., 1990). In Masten et al. (1990), several studies are discussed to provide insight into the

birth of resilience, and subsequent contributions were noted. Longitudinal studies include the Study of Adult Development at Harvard Medical School, which followed socioeconomically disadvantaged males from adolescence to middle age to determine the influences of upward mobility. IQ and coping during childhood were determined to be positive influences (Masten et al., 1990). Under normal circumstances, one may think negative influences create negative outcomes; however, resilience creates positive or opposite outcomes (Masten et al., 1990).

Another longitudinal study of resilient children and youth determined that parents diagnosed with schizophrenia may lack the capacity to provide consistent physical or emotional care, which significantly impacts outcomes. One-tenth of the subjects were found to be resilient. Three phenomena were noted: first, good outcomes occur despite high risk, next sustained competence under threat, and lastly, recovery from trauma was apparent in the subjects. Seery (2011) noted the importance of stressful situations for resilience, also known as toughness, skills to develop. This further solidifies the relationship between stress and resilience.

Notably, Cicchetti et al. (1993) exposed early studies in areas alluding to resilience, better known as stress resistance. Instead, people with schizophrenia who appeared to adapt and positively function in their lives, working and acting responsibly, were seen as recovering from their mental illness (Cicchetti et al., 1993; Luthar et al., 2000). Norman Garnezy led the charge in efforts to discover and research resilience as a viable set of skills whose development, when manifested, contributes to manageable transition through troubling experiences.

Risk Factors

Risks have been classified as an unavoidable event that may derail normal functioning (Johnson et al., 2004). Risk factors include poverty, low social environments, and minority status. Resilience has been present in several pathological studies and those exposed to traumatic events. Risks must be present for resilience to occur, and often may be discovered in clusters (Cicchetti et al., 1993; Masten, 2008). For instance, Seery (2011) shared that those who previously faced adversity perform better in troubling situations than those with no previous exposure or knowledge of overcoming adverse situations.

Protective Factors

Resulting resilience research contributed to its theoretical concepts attributing to other facets of life. Of those studied was the idea of resilience in the school context (Masten, 2003). Garmezy's groundbreaking work is featured in literature and research studies. Managing future difficult situations has been attributed to successful past experiences. To aid in successfully overcoming past experiences, establishing and supportive surroundings to include people, systems, and coping techniques are important (Seery, 2011). Erik Morales' study of 50 students' resilience in educational settings further established the importance of resilience in educational realms and potentially offered guidance for institutes of higher learning when working with vulnerable populations (Morales, 2010).

Resilience Frameworks

An important framework in school-based resilience was discussed in Masten (2008). The framework consisted of interventions including mission, models, measures,

and methods working in combination to focus on the positive rather than just what is wrong. As explained by Masten et al. (2008), the mission is a way to focus on progress, positive objectives, and outcomes. These are not just for the student but for other stakeholders also. Masten et al. (2008) also highlighted in academic interventions that the establishment of goals is an important concept rather than focusing on problems like teenage pregnancy and underage drinking. The idea of modeling allows a check during or after adversity by assessing progress allows measuring to determine what works during the process. In Masten's model, it is pointed out a lack of history related to positive aspects of interventions (Cicchetti et al., 1993). Checking progress during newer assessments will allow researchers and others to assess influences, peer relationships, and motivation to learn; this includes at both individual and school levels. How this will be done should be theory-based and include aspects of interventions, problem-solving skills, attachment, and motivation; however, this is not an exhaustive list. The early identification and addressing of risks, strategies involving well-trained mentors, and approaches that include a variety of available tools and components are also suggested (Masten et al., 2008; 2009; 2012).

Morales Resilience Framework

Morales studied resilience with a focus on academic success. Like Garmezy, Morales (2010) focused on the positive outcomes and their influences in alleviating obstacles that may influence negative outcomes. He found that protective factors aided in one's ability to overcome academic obstacles to complete a goal. In his work, "Linking Strengths," Morales (2010) also noted the importance of discovering why some students

succeed when others do not, given the same challenges. His resilience framework included the identification of risk factors, protective factors, vulnerability areas, and compensatory strategies. A resilience framework that includes the discovery of protective factors is imperative to understanding what nontraditional students employ to foster resilience in an academic setting. These individual, familial, and environmental factors have been instrumental in providing the encouragement needed to achieve goals (Gault et al., 2020).

An important concept of Morales' work included the idea that these protective factors sometimes appear in clusters for maximum benefit (Morales, 2010). These clusters may aid in both retention and graduation of students. Examples of clusters include caring school staff, persistence, and high self-esteem (Morales, 2010). Morales (2014), as quoted by Morales et al. (2014), expressed academic resilience is the act of achieving when the circumstances normally allude to failure. Morales (2010) further concluded academic resilience is "part of the life story" of those who are successful while others facing the same challenges are not.

Morales et al. (2011) shared narratives of 50 (n) students in higher education. In his writing *A Focus on Hope*, it is determined that resilience is cyclical and includes areas around a hub of emotional intelligence. The cycle includes the identification of needs and challenges, protective factors, self-efficacy, and enduring motivation (Morales et al., 2011). Protective factors, working in clusters, were determined to have provided optimum influence.

Tinto Resilience Model

Retention rates are an important factor in college graduation rates. Cotton et al. (2017) sought to explore the retention of nontraditional students in higher education. During the research, the idea of resilience emerged and its effect on the retention of students. Using a model developed by Tinto, the group found that not only is the students' past approach to challenges important to their perseverance, but how the university reacts and works with nontraditional attendees is paramount. Focusing on a student's past, support circle, and sense of belonging was included in the information gathering and deemed important provided additional information. Results of student narrative included protective and risk factors shared by subjects as viable to the universities response to assist with retention. Lack of employment, inability to create positive social circles, and lack of encouraging university representatives were all listed as risk factors. Positive support serves as protective factors and may be implemented to offset challenges faced by nontraditional students. It is as important to address the risk and protective factors of higher education influences as it is to understand the individual student. While some aspects of Tinto's model have been questioned related to specific concepts, it is important to note that risk and protective factors are discussed in the framework and provide significant information related to this research (Nicoletti, 2019).

Resilience theories and frameworks demonstrate that adversity contributes to resilience. Resilience theory provided a model for this research project. Risk, as well as protective factors, contribute to internal student resilience. In a narrative process, nontraditional African American women students provided information in their own

words, discussing their obstacles and what factors contributed to their initial enrollment, re-enrollment, and retention in college.

While the idea of women African American students is not a new phenomenon, colleges and universities must focus on this group of students in their retention and graduation efforts. In addition to their minority status, these students are defined as independent (head of household), full-time or part-time employees, and caring for dependent children. Graduating from college may be considered a priority; however, caring for families and paying bills is imperative for these students and families' survival, making classes and homework secondary in their lives (Parsons, 2017). Managing these priorities contributes to fostering and maintaining perseverance and building resilience to continue toward the goal of graduation. Nontraditional African American women students shared their stories of resilience for this research project.

Resilience in Higher Education

Resilience has evolved and has become an important factor in several areas, including education. Examining how some students overcome barriers is important to retention and persistence in graduation. The ability to overcome obstacles in the educational environment has proven significant in early education (Liew et al., 2018). Determining what impacts success means breaking down what hinders it. In the study by Liew et al. (2018), relationships were paramount. Specifically, as early as grade school, the link between adversity, resilience, and primary subjects like math and reading was established. In one of the first studies of its kind, over a three-year period, student, peer, and teaching relationships were observed after the academic risk was confirmed. In this

research, the protective factor of relationship fostered resilience and was proven to positively influence reading, engagement, and achievement of the subject (Liew et al., 2018). In addition, its unique skills and effects on higher education have now become paramount.

The role of resilience is also being studied in higher education. In articles by Ang et al. (2021), Tope-Banjoko et al. (2020), and Widjaja et al. (2021), different approaches focused on resilience in academics. Tope-Banjoko et al. (2020) spotlighted negative self-efficacy and other attributes to determine academic success. In a long-term study, surveys were used to gather information identifying a correlation between self-handicapping, cognitive, and emotional regulation, mindfulness, and academic results (Tope-Banjoko et al., 2020). The phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) was the theoretical framework behind the analysis. One aspect of the theory suggests that identity is the result of individual events and how they are experienced. The research theorized that scores on Patterns of Adaptive Learning (PALS), Short-form Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SSRQ), Cognitive-Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) are indicative of resilience in students who score high on the sub-scales of the surveys. The aim of the study was to show a positive correlation between the questionnaires' results and mindfulness, cognitive-emotional regulation, and self-handicapping behaviors. Tope-Banjoko et al. (2020) defined self-handicapping as anything associated with an act that impedes success due to fear of failure by the student. The data consisted of the results of 400 (*n*) African American STEM students enrolled in introductory science classes. Once surveys were completed,

the variables were compared, and a positive correlation emerged between the identified negative behaviors of the CERQ and self-handicapping. Tope-Banjoko et al. (2020) concluded that academic resilience results from the student's ability to overcome adversity through positive coping techniques.

Widjaja et al. (2021) provided a look at information from existing student data. This allowed the opportunity to observe without subjects being influenced by the observer's presence. In this approach, the academic resilience analytics framework utilized existing student data to identify classroom disappointment and its effects on subsequent classroom outcomes (Widjaja et al., 2021). Student disappointments are identified as a grade of C or below during a course or scores below average compared to other students at the completion of the course. These datasets were compared to the student's ability to overcome and move forward in their academic pursuits in future classes. Widjaja et al. (2021) concluded identification and the early support of academic adversity is key to student success in higher education.

A meta-ethnographic analysis by Ang et al. (2021) focused on the examination of previous research to form themes associated with resilience. The studies were scored based on a Critical Appraisal Skills Program tool, which identified clarity, data collection, and study design among its elements. Three themes emerged. Resilience is associated with internal motivation and positive thinking, relationships that cushion negativity, and interaction with supportive people. All these aid in the development of necessary skills in individual students (Brogden et al., 2019). The themes emerged because of the qualitative segment of the articles' research (Ang et al., 2021). These

academic studies revealed the importance of resilience in student success in higher education as well as the importance of qualitative studies.

To address resilience, Durso et al. (2021) developed the Academic Resilience Model after researching literature. It was determined that resilience is common and not viewed as an exceptional trait (Masten, 2015). The Academic Resilience Model seeks to explain the process by which students face and overcome adversity or dropout of college. These steps reiterate the importance of protective factors and employing them at the right time to foster endurance, thereby working through the challenge of staying enrolled in school. The focus of the model teaches that an individual focused on a specific career or program is more likely to stay enrolled and graduate than those uncertain and, therefore, less committed (Durso et al., 2021). Like other researchers, Durso et al. (2020) posit individual, system and environmental protective factors assist in overcoming obstacles to achieve the desired result.

Institutions of Higher Learning

Traditionally, colleges and universities were described as 2-or 4-year institutions with a variation of students living on campus or off campus. The students were 18–24 years old and recent high school graduates. Traditional students have also been described as enrolling in college immediately after high school or having family members with college experience. Nontraditional students encompass minorities from low socio-economic backgrounds and part-time or returning students (Baglow et al., 2019; EBSCO, 2014; Kara et al., 2019). Today's students are from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Just as the demographic of the student population has evolved, so have the institutional

characteristics. Schools now include hybrid classes as well as classes and degrees earned solely online. Some students never physically visit the campuses they graduate from. No longer is making time to attend or working out a schedule to attend in-person classes a barrier to graduating. Students are now able to attend classes or access content when it is convenient for them.

Resilience Concepts in Higher Education

Resilience has evolved since the early studies by Norman Garmezy and his colleagues. In addition to psychopathological influences, subsequent researchers have studied the effects of resilience on education, as well as physical and emotional well-being (Mushonga et al., 2020; Oehme et al., 2019;). Success in these areas has been associated with resilience (Durso et al., 2021). Most researchers agree that there can be no resilience without highly stressful situations. These highly stressful situations are often referred to as risk factors, and resilience refers to the ability to overcome those situations (Parsons,2017). Once faced with adversity, students must employ protective factors for support and demonstrate perseverance, maintaining until the goals of retention and, ultimately, graduation from institutes of higher learning occurs. Hargraves (2020) identified emotional regulation, impulse control, problem analysis, empathy, positivity, self-efficacy, and reaching out to others as attributes students need to foster resilience. How students dealt with past experiences in these areas also contributed to either maladaptive or positive coping (Tope-Banjoko et al., 2020).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) comprises data on education, including postsecondary schools. College characteristics include public and

private institutions, their enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. Over the past 3 years enrollment for distance learning was averaged at 61% (NCES, 2023). In 2021 of the 19,036,612 post-secondary students over 6 million were 25 years of age or older. Walden University is a four-year private institution with an enrollment of over 42,000. Of those seeking undergraduate degrees, more than 34% are African American, the second-highest enrolled of all races. Walden's undergraduate degree seekers include 89% over 25 years of age, one of the characteristics of nontraditional students. In comparison, NCES (2022) also reported of the almost 14 million enrolled students in 2021, about 1.9 million were African American women while their white counterparts represented over 7.8 million. It is imperative to explore the interest of African American women in enrolling in distance learning education and their success.

Risks to Retention and Graduation in Higher Education

Early resilience researchers studied the outcome of children who were faced with significant adversity (Shean, 2015). Exploration of attributes in children who succeeded despite challenges intrigued and encouraged further observation. With regard to higher education, students shared they faced hurdles that sometimes prolong or derail the goal of graduation (Gault et al., 2020). Students attending online universities have also disclosed several barriers to completing their education. Internal, external, and program challenges are often barriers to educational attainment (Kara et al., 2019). Kara et al. (2019) listed adult learning challenges to include time management, computer skills, and low self-confidence. Additionally, focusing on the negative is also a risk factor (Hargrave, 2019).

Identification of positive experiences may influence long-term effects on retention and graduation rates.

Internal Concepts

Kara et al., 2019 discussed program-related challenges, including feelings of isolation, a challenge reiterated by Kundu, 2019. Feelings of isolation impede students from seeking assistance, including tutors or support from instructors and advisors (Kundu, 2019). It is important to create an atmosphere of inclusion as early as possible so that new students seek out assistance. It may be as simple as answering questions appropriately to keep a student from feelings of isolation and lack of belongingness. Not fitting in may occur if students feel overwhelmed and not prepared for college.

Lack of preparedness for college may be deemed as a risk factor. Milovanska-Farrington (2020) noted that students who are not prepared for college might achieve lower grades. Students who face academic hurdles with little or no recourse may sense frustration, and a lack of equitable problem-solving could lead to dropout and reduce chances of graduation. The work of Erik Morales' focus on risk and protective factors is of significant interest to resilience in higher education. The top five risk factors associated with academic achievement were reported as lack of access to money and material goods, stress or pressure from having to be a spokesperson for their racial or ethnic group, sub-par pre-college preparation, non-academic peer group, and lack of family or community academic role models (Morales, 2010).

External Concepts

Davidson et al., 2020, conducted research via focus groups aimed at raising awareness of African American higher education barriers. Of particular interest is the question of how home and school support systems impact enrollment. High school guidance counselors are an important source of information and support for students wanting to enroll in institutes of higher learning (Davidson et al., 2020). When students have questions related to higher education, social networks may be instrumental in providing information and fostering support, the lack of which may have adverse effects (Ang et al., 2021). Other external risk includes lack of support from family members or others normally depended upon by the student. One factor considered by nontraditional students is opportunities to excel in their current careers. An already employed student must manage time well in order to meet the obligations of work and school to be successful. Also considered external or environmental risks are the perception of a lack of culturally relatable school personnel, college or university personnel, as well as tutoring services (Morales, 2010).

Program Challenges

A student's previous relationship with universities has a bearing on their retention. If a student has already faced adversity and dropped out of college, they may associate those feelings with current challenges (Karmelita, 2020). Prior to attending college, students have also described barriers. Both African American and White families support higher education, but African American students shared they receive little to no help with the enrollment process from previous schools (Davidson et al., 2020). Remedial courses required for students, largely minority, with limited access to guidance

counselors are a normal occurrence. These courses prolong the time to graduation and could serve as a barrier to achievement. In this instance, the high school system student combination did not prepare students for successful college adaptation.

Factors Aiding in Retention and Graduation in Higher Education

Garmezy, Morales, and Tinto all discussed the impact of protective factors on resilience. Protective factors in higher education are those positive influences that encourage and aid students in overcoming adversity to achieve their desired goal of graduation. Factors, as previously mentioned, may be single or appear in clusters. Students have shared influences such as family support, a sense of belongingness, and metacognition as attributed to their retention and graduation (Blankson et al., 2019; Kara et al., 2019). For nontraditional students, obstacles faced may be slightly different than those faced by traditional college students. Nontraditional students have dependents, are employed, and have other financial obligations that are considered as important as the college education they are seeking (Karmelita, 2020). In most instances, maintaining a household and other familial obligations cannot be put on hold to achieve a degree (Gault et al., 2020). Both are expected to be achieved in conjunction.

Individual Factors

Positive cognitive emotional regulation, motivation, and perseverance are internal protective factors (Braund et al., 2020; Tope-Banjoko et al., 2020). Positive cognitive emotional regulation is the ability to dispel negative thoughts and forge ahead despite facing adversity. For college students, this may mean continuing to study when an unexpected low grade is received, making time to study after you have assisted a child

with their homework, and even completing an assignment during a lunch break after forgetting to allocate time previously. The inclusion of positive self-talk may aid in cognitive-emotional regulation. Positive refocusing and appraisal are necessary to overcome self-blame when there is no plan to move forward or overcome adversity (Tope-Banjoko et al., 2020).

Cognitive emotional regulation includes attributes such as positive self-talk, minimizing self-blame, addressing frustration, and the ability to refocus (Semenchuck et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2022). Xiao et al. (2022) reminded us that previous studies prove relationships between positive emotions and resilience are important. When faced with challenges in higher education, Xiao et al. (2022) noted being upbeat and confident assists in overcoming barriers, and cognitive regulation is imperative to balancing life and responsibilities. Applying positive cognitive emotional strategies influences how to identify challenges and skills to employ to rebalance and move forward. Tope-Banjoko et al. (2020) suggested self-regulation as a means of coping with the demands of college.

Motivation

Perseverance is seen as the ability to work through undesirable situations to complete a goal. It may also be classified as a student's ability to apply grit or a growth mindset to situations to move past obstacles. Braund et al. (2020) described grit as a personal attribute worthy of further study to understand a mother's ability to successfully remain in college. A growth mindset is being open-minded to one's abilities or untapped skills. Hard work contributes to overcoming believed failures to keep trying or working towards academic goals (Kim et al., 2022; Rothes et al., 2022). Internal thoughts,

processes, and beliefs influence reactions and outcomes in educational settings. Working to reframe is imperative to reaching goals that, at times, seem impossible.

Familial and Social Factors

Morales's work also revealed parents' authoritative parenting style, high parental expectations supported by words and actions, and mother modeling strong work ethic as familial protective factors (Morales, 2010). Mushonga et al. (2020) further highlighted the importance of social support for nontraditional African American students. Positive mental health has been associated with students' perception of the support received from others. For African Americans in college, it is a protective factor necessary for success (Mushonga, 2020).

Systemic Factors

In McGuire (2020), MSIs or minority-serving institutions were discussed as having a positive influence on students of color and mitigating the challenges they face. The systems in place should address the needs of the culture of nontraditional minority students (Milovanska-Farrington, 2020). This mirrors information related to caring school personnel, social groups, and organizations, as well as school-sponsored tutoring services to address challenges such as lack of preparedness, sense of belongingness, and motivation (Morales, 2010). Both identifying with the Black race and spirituality are associated with the ability to cope and act as a buffer in the college environment (Mushonga et al., 2020).

Systemically, colleges and universities have explored transition programs to aid nontraditional students. These programs should foster relationships with faculty and staff

and inform students of their educational expectations and the understanding universities have regarding their status as parents, full-time employees, and other non-college obligations. The programs also have served as an introduction to students to institutional requirements and processes (Karmelita, 2020). Presenting expectations early will reduce the trauma associated with college obligations.

Maintaining Resilience in Higher Education

Resilience maintenance includes student awareness of negative influences and protective factors. Ongoing maintenance includes planning and accessing available resources. Internal and external protective factors aid in the ongoing development of resilience. Resources include advisors, faculty, and other staff within the academic community (Karmelita, 2020).

Nontraditional students face some of the same challenges as their traditional counterparts. Most students experience adversity when faced with bad grades or if they fail to establish positive relationships during college. Ultimately, when perseverance occurs, it is likely due to whatever motivated students to enroll and continue enrolling until they graduate. Recent literature identified struggles with students in higher education, including the resilience of students who can see the positive in challenging situations (Hargrave, 2019).

In addition, resilience maintenance is imperative to a successful college experience. An important concept was promoted by Erik Morales (2010), known as the resilience cycle. Because adversity is not a one-time occurrence, students should consider the benefits of employing these concepts in future situations. The cycle includes

identifying needs or awareness of a challenge, building or employing protective factors, protective factors working to influence resilience, the internal building of self-efficacy, and enduring motivation.

The focus of this study is the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students. For this research study, nontraditional is defined as 25 years of age or older, with dependent children or a spouse, employed, and who did not complete a bachelor's degree within five years if immediately enrolled in college after high school graduation. Any combination of the previously listed characteristics will be used to classify students as nontraditional for this study.

Nonacademic Obligations

A growing number of college students have obligations that are nonacademic (Gault, 2020; The Education Trust-West, 2020). These include employment, nontuition financial obligations, lack of housing, and responsibilities associated with parenting. In 2020 Gault et al. expressed the need for parenting data at colleges and universities as a means to provide better support for parenting students. Gault et al. (2020) and The Education Trust-West (2020) also recognized the lack of parenting data potentially impedes progress as less than 40% of parent students graduate within six years of enrollment. Many higher education statistical databases do not collect parenting information; however, caring for dependent children is a viable component when considering retention and graduation rates in higher education. Colleges may use student-parent data to assist with basic needs and resource referrals to mitigate stress related to parenting obligations.

Other Basic Needs

Capturing nontraditional student obligations includes basic needs. Data for this will consist of student employment statistics, food, shelter, clothing for themselves and their families, and familial support (Perez-Flekner et al., 2020). The collection of parenting data as a means for colleges to provide support is also important in determining specific needs. Parents are unique students as they face problems associated with household essentials in addition to educational obligations (Gault et al., 2020). Poverty, unstable housing, food insecurities, and caretaker duties are seen as potential obstacles to staying enrolled in institutes of higher learning for nontraditional women students (Witkowsky et al., 2018). These basic daily living responsibilities make them more susceptible to dropping out or extending the time needed to obtain a college degree, likely increasing financial and familial stress (Witkowsky et al., 2018; Witteveen et al., 2021). Long (2018) disclosed that not completing college increases a woman's likelihood of living in poverty. Additional support deemed as domestic surfaced as a barrier to graduating (Kara et al., 2019). One critical component is the availability of family support. This support could be utilized to free up time for students to study and accomplish other academic obligations (Kara, 2019; Ritchey, 2016). Family has been known to be instrumental in the support of retention and, ultimately, graduation from college (Kara et al., 2019).

Basic needs include non-campus as well as on-campus costs. For nontraditional minorities, finances are also a source of stress and may negatively impact retention and graduation rates (Leggins, 2021). Many of these students entering college for their

bachelor's degree do so not knowing the financial obligations involved (Parez-Felkner et al., 2020). College is not just tuition for classes but also includes textbooks, lab fees, and other costs, all of which add up and impact acquiring basic needs (Peters et al., 2019).

Basic needs also include self-care of the student. Kundu highlighted the idea of student burnout. Reminding oneself why they are attending college may serve as motivation but also may cause undue stress if students struggle to balance work, school, and self-care obligations (Kundu, 2019; Baglow et al., 2019). Lack of sleep, long hours for paid work, inadequate nutrition, and mental health challenges such as anxiety, panic attacks, and depression may be helped with trigger identification and coping skills that encourage positive self-care (Tope-Bajoko et al., 2020; Kara et al., 2019).

Gaps in Literature

A focus on positive aspects of resilience is important to the forward movement of college retention and graduation rates. According to Eller et al. (2018), African American students are enrolling in four-year colleges but are not graduating at the same rates as their white counterparts. After studying persistence of minority nontraditional African American female students in community colleges Ebanks et al. (2023) noted, the importance of further exploration related to enrollment and graduation in four-year institutions. Braund et al (2020, 2022), described narratives of single mother college students as survival stories and shared her research sought to fill a gap in the literature while recommending additional research discussions including correlations between external resources, grit, and discovering other resources to aid in retention and graduation. Eller et al. (2018) and Parsons et al. (2017) point to factors other than past

academic achievement as factors predicting retention and graduation rates. In the Paradox of Persistence, Eller et al. 2018 encouraged the exploration of student persistence and the role of gender as a necessary step in understanding the completion gap and a limitation of their study. A study by Kara et al. (2019) focused on published literature related to online adult learners' challenges rather than direct participant interviews and noted the importance of seeking feedback from students upon exit. The study listed limitations of the research as presenting findings based on a literature review rather than interviews of the students themselves.

In addition, a significant finding was the need to explore distance learning strategies of specific groups such as gender or age. Xiao et al. (2022), explored resilience through data analysis and shared student challenges related to meeting basic needs and factors which offset those needs in recently graduated college students. The study pointed to the need to refocus on student poverty as this was identified as a major source of stress during college years. The study identified protective factors that may be of use by others with economic stressors. While this study focused on teens, a limitation mentioned highlighted it is imperative to study other groups for similar challenges and protective factors.

Researchers such as Ang, Price, Widjaja, and others contributed to resilience in higher education and provided notable suggestions for future studies. In an examination of resilience, Ang et al. (2021) noted further research is necessary. The initial research focused on experiences in higher education and the importance of external relationships as well as internal attributes to foster resilience and suggested further research will aid in

studying the subject. Price et al. (2022) provided an overview of designer resilience and ended the study in advocating for future research to identify general resilience constructs that may assist a more diverse group of people. Lastly, Widjaja et al. (2021) noted the importance of resilience and its correlation to academics and persistence in higher education. The research suggested future studies that allow for insight into student resilience to assist in retention program development. These studies expose the need for future resilience research in higher education.

There must be a way to increase retention and graduation rates among this sect of students. The sub-category of those 25 years of age and older is the growing number of African American students, considered nontraditional. In recent years, from 2019 – 2020, approximately 6 million college students were 25 or older (NCES, 2020). Literature has pointed to family, ethical, and other obligations that place college education on hold due to unforeseen circumstances (McGuire, 2020). Studies have sought to explore college student experiences to improve both retention and graduation rates of students considered nontraditional (Leggins, 2021; Walker et al., 2017).

According to the Education Data Initiative (2024), approximately 16 % of college students are 25 years of age or older, a steady number in the past few years. Hanson (2021) suggested these students may also work full-time or have families to support them. Oehme et al. (2019) and Tope-Banjoko et al. (2020) discussed the importance of resilience as a necessary skill for college students. Women's college enrollment has increased by approximately 35% since the 1960s, and they enroll at higher rates than men (Hanson, 2021). Current retention and graduation strategies include establishing

programs and processes that identify risk factors and introducing techniques aimed at overcoming adversity to promote positive life experiences and the capacity to achieve college graduation (Parsons, 2017). Eller et al. (2018) suggest exploring qualitative aspects of black students in the areas related to persistence, and Sapp (2021) suggests further exploration of Black students and their motivation to persevere, focusing on self-determination of nontraditional college student populations is worthy of further exploration (Rothes et al., 2022).

Identification of successful resilience skills for academic success is paramount (Oehme et al., 2019). This is a necessary component for the over 2 million African American women students currently enrolled in college (NCES, 2020). Invaluable insight into women African American students' experiences while working towards a college degree can be obtained by hearing their stories of resilience firsthand (Davidson et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2020). Other authors suggest delving into college students' experiences is a worthy extension of existing research to address how those students overcame adversity and continued their pursuit of academic achievement (Datzer et al., 2022; Kundu, 2019; Putwain et al., 2020). My study explores women African American Students' lived experiences with resilience. It is in colleges' best interest to actively listen to this group of students and increase their chances of graduating as they have a proven enrollment record.

Summary

The goal of Chapter 2 was to explore and summarize resilience in higher education and the literature that relates to perseverance in nontraditional African

American women students to graduate. In this study, research was conducted to explore the known and unknown applications of resilience and its concepts in this specific student population. Those concepts include the attributes of positive factors, positive factor clusters, and maintenance of the resilience cycle previously explored by Erik Morales and others.

It is identified in previous research there is a positive correlation between protective factors and persistence in achieving a goal. Statistics provide an important trend for nontraditional students. Their return to college should be explored, and addressing their unique needs is imperative to their success in educational endeavors.

Past resilience research information highlighted negative aspects or lack of success in higher education. The focus now should be on what motivates students to persevere when faced with barriers. Graduation statistics show there are a growing number of nontraditional students enrolling in colleges and universities. This project highlights the need to assist those students in accomplishing the goal of graduation. Chapter 3 will discuss the research design and method. The chapter will also provide context, identify study participants, describe data collection instruments, and discuss trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study explored the lived experiences of nontraditional, African American women college students. It specifically focused on the challenges affecting their retention and graduation in higher education. The study highlights resilience concepts shared by nontraditional African American women colleges students. The study will add to the already growing literature on positive aspects related to protective factors employed by nontraditional African American women college students promoting understanding of the factors that enable resilience and academic success among this population of student.

In this research study, I listened to and captured specific information from participants as they describe their individual lived experiences with academia in postsecondary education settings in a way that is intimately their own words. This approach is narrative in nature and involves the retelling of the student's experiences in a descriptive way in their own words. In this chapter research design and rationale, methodology, project design, the role of researcher, participants and criteria for selection, data collection and analysis, validity, and ethical procedures are discussed.

Previous researchers have suggested future research should include nontraditional African American women students' experiences with college offered supports (Braund et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023). Milovanska-Farrington (2020), proposed future research on the reasons a student might persist and stay in college. Putwain et al. (2020), proposed future research to determine if overcoming academic challenges works as a protective factor aiding in future academic achievement while Wladis et al. (2023), suggested

research should be done to gain a better understanding of online student characteristic and how they succeed. In a previous literature Morris-Compton et al. (2021), examined the importance of social and academic integration. Describing its importance to retention and persistence, the study sought to analyze if the two factors aided in African American persistence to reenroll and graduate. The study found that social integration is not a predictor in nontraditional African American students. While the study was focused on community college enrollment it was suggested that future research is warranted to better understand what characteristics aid in retention and graduation.

Using these conversations may expand knowledge of resilience concepts used for continued academic success in this student demographic. The study has important social change implications. By identifying factors that promote resilience and academic success in nontraditional African American women students, institutes of higher learning can develop or improve support services tailored to this population. These enhanced services could help increase retention and graduation rates for these students. The underrepresentation of nontraditional African American women in higher education, makes this study necessary to provide insights that could inform practices aimed at empowering more students from this demographic to successfully complete college. This first-hand knowledge will prove invaluable as it can be used in support of programs assisting nontraditional African American women college students.

Research Design and Rationale

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional, African American women college students and what are resilience skills that contribute to their retention and graduation from college?

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study. In a narrative form I conducted semistructured interviews, allowing participants to answer questions openly, allowing them the opportunity to elaborate on the challenges faced while pursuing a degree and the subsequent resilience methods put in place to help them overcome identified barriers. It has significant social implications in that many still consider obtaining a college degree an option to improve their ability to provide for their families, improve marketability for employment, and change socioeconomic outcomes (Milovanska-Farrington, 2020). Previous researchers have exposed obstacles associated with obtaining a college degree. Research has also proven that obstacles provide the opportunity to build resilience skills which may have positive long-term implications (Mehmet et al., 2019).

The research tradition selected for this study is narrative. Narrative research is associated with storytelling. Merriam et al. (2016), shared that narratives are a way people share their life experiences. In this research project first-hand accounts are imperative to determine the resilience practices of nontraditional African American women students. Narrative research is a longstanding qualitative method of inquiry which allows a person to provide insight into their life experiences to be retold (Creswell et al., 2018; Merriam et al., 2016). Narrative research provides the opportunity for participants

to discuss experiences in their own words and the data was collected and categorized into themes.

The selection of a narrative approach stems from the need for firsthand information regarding lived experiences. To enhance patient-centered care, Cusatis et al., 2019, noted all members of a care team valued the input from patients. In a qualitative study, Datzler et al. (2022) shared that interviews with stakeholders were the most efficient way to review current processes for best practices. It was also noted that those interviews were invaluable for further recruitment. Also, in a basic need study, Perez-Felkner et al. (2020) allowed doctorate students to share their stories in an effort to identify ways to handle the needs of students faced with financial insecurity when pursuing post-graduate degrees. Speculation is important, but firsthand knowledge from those who lived through the experiences is invaluable.

The goal of this narrative study was to (a) explore lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students; (b) identify what these students describe as risks to graduating; and (c) contribute to current literature focusing on the needs of this student population. The research question developed for this study was focused on asking participants about their lived experiences and what resilience factors emerged that increased their chances of graduating from college. It is important to engage directly with students who can provide a firsthand account of what it is like being a nontraditional African American woman college student. Speaking to students who are currently enrolled in college will provide insight into recent positive practices they

employ when faced with highly stressful situations. A qualitative approach was the best choice for this research study.

Qualitative research is a process by which people explore experiences through stories, lives, and cultures to gain understanding through the lens of observation and interviewing (Cresswell et al., 2018; Merriam et al., 2016). Qualitative research is categorized into five types. Those include case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology, which are types of qualitative research typically utilized to conduct studies. One of the basic tenets of qualitative research is interviewing. Researchers such as Morales noted the method of interviewing allows for robust conversation which provides intricate details of participant experiences (Morales, 2010). All qualitative types also differ from quantitative research in its use of people rather than numbers as the most important concept. The five types also differ from each other in that some focus on establishing theory, others on system interactions, and even phenomena. While they all provide an in-depth look into what is meant by a story, process, and the data gathered, they also provide individualized analysis of the information to determine emerging themes or patterns (Creswell et al., 2018; Merriam et al., 2016). For the purposes of this study, I used a narrative approach.

A narrative approach allows for intimate analysis of the story told and the relationship that occurs between the storyteller, their feelings, and their perception of events. Experience and reflection are also important concepts of narrative research and have proven invaluable in attempts to understand and interpret information shared by researchers and participants (Clandinin et al., 1989; Feather et al., 2017). In examples

stories told by nurses and patients, as well as students and staff, have proven beneficial to challenges and changes necessary to provide support and increase the likelihood of positive outcomes (Feather et al., 2017; Leggins, 2021; Porter et al., 2021; Rossetto et al., 2022).

Rossetto et al. (2022) supported the use of communication in higher education. Allowing students to share their needs and challenges is beneficial to both the students and the universities they attend. Asking students to explain and even expound on their challenges as well as their triumphs should be well documented and shared to foster a collaborative educational environment. Narrative research proved important to this study as there was a need to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of nontraditional African American college students.

Role of the Researcher

An important part of the role of a researcher in this narrative study was to remain vigilant in recognizing, analyzing, and notating any bias if the researcher has experienced similar events. A kinship with the challenges faced by this population provided a unique and intimate understanding of the experiences of potential participants. My starting a college career after the age of 25, with a dependent child, while working a full-time job may be considered and thought to interfere with the reliability of interview outcomes and data analysis. My prior knowledge of the struggles to obtain a college degree as a nontraditional African American woman student provides insight and an understanding of what it takes to persevere. Beginning my pursuit of a college degree in my late 20's has also afforded me the unique opportunity to explore protective factors that may be

common for this demographic of students. Reviewing results with participants for accuracy helps to minimize researcher bias in the interpretation of data. While my background may pose some risk, the same background proved helpful in asking crucial follow-up questions of participants. It was imperative for me as the researcher not to read into or assume what a participant meant and instead asked clarifying questions when necessary because it was important for the student's experience to be shared and not my own. I maintained a professional attitude during interactions and was impartial during information gathering and sharing (Rubin et al., 2012). As referenced by Spear (2012), the ethics and integrity of the research are directly linked to the researcher.

Researcher ethical considerations include respecting the idea that participants may share intimate details of their lives. Researchers should be passionate without influencing the information shared. Researchers must do no harm to participants and proactively offer the resources necessary to ensure their wellbeing (APA, 2017; Blakley, 2022). I am a guest invited into participants' lives and I respected that and acted accordingly. No compensation for participants nor promises were made.

I also explicitly focused on identifying reflexively biases, values, and my personal background to maintain transparency throughout this research project. Reflexive practices included mindful observation of my past experiences and how they may have shaped my interpretation of the data and made every effort to minimize personal bias when interacting. Creswell et al. (2018) interview protocol served as a guide. I provided the project information and my idea for interview structure, built rapport by getting to know the participant, asked questions related to the research to include additional questions that

were probing and open in nature to provoke thought, and closed after time had been allotted for follow-up questions by participants before debriefing. I did not lie about my past to further the research (Babbie,2017). It is the role of the researcher to share the stories of the participants in a way that represents them both (Creswell et al., 2018).

The importance of the researcher is bolstered in several articles related to qualitative data analysis. Being true to the data means recognizing that no software takes the place of the actual person or people conducting qualitative research. Software is meant to enhance or aid in making processes such as coding and development of themes easier, not to take the place of the researcher's input (Parameswaran et al., 2020; Spear, 2018; Zamawe, 2015).

Methodology

Participant selection included purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is appropriate due to the need to interview only participants with characteristics for the research study. These students were selected based on their access to the Walden Participant Pool and Facebook. Purposeful sampling helped me to ensure only African American women over the age of 25 years old, independent status, employed, and in pursuit of a degree at were selected for this research project.

A narrative approach was selected as appropriate for the allowance of free-form speech utilizing open-ended questions. Jirek (2017) suggested a narrative work assists with progress. It is important to utilize this methodology to allow stories of challenges and successes to be shared firsthand. This section includes the data collection process and data analysis techniques.

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students. This study provided qualitative information from the student's point of view, sharing how they process and overcome challenging situations by applying resilience skills when faced with adversity to continue their pursuit of a degree in higher education. This approach encouraged, not limit, what was said, and allowed the participants to speak freely so shared experiences emerged. Focusing on experiences with risk and protective factors to foster resilience is not a new phenomenon, but positive attributes are seldom highlighted by researchers (Datzer et al., 2022). Exploration of the challenges to identify the positives was the purpose of this research.

To address content validity, the research question for this project was presented to my dissertation committee and other Walden University representatives for review. The alignment for the project and subsequent discussions ensured the question would capture the essence of lived experiences. According to Belotto (2018), it is important to seek information out information and input from experts in the field. This ensured the questions and methods of inquiry captures information pertinent to the subject being explored (Babbie, 2017).

Instrumentation

Data for this research was collected in the form of semistructured interviews in a narrative format. Narratives are stories shared by an individual, normally about their own lives or experiences (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell et al., 2018; Merriam et al., 2016;

Patton 2015). The information was captured in a Zoom audio recording platform (Burkholder et al., 2020).

The interview questions were designed to be open-ended and allowed participants to share their experiences freely. During the initial stages, I asked questions to build rapport prior to delving into the specific questions; this process allowed participants to share information on their own terms; and potentially provide information without the need to ask specific questions while also prompting questions from the researcher which were relevant but not thought of initially. After interviews were completed, participants were asked to review their transcript to ensure the content was valid and represented their experiences.

Population

NCES forecasts the nontraditional student population rising over the next 10 years (NCES, 2021). To positively influence graduation rates for this population it is important to hear their triumphs for the purpose of potentially sharing with others who choose college as their journey. The idea was to select 5 – 10 participants to have at least 5 robust stories of resilience and focus on what keeps these students enrolling with the goal of obtaining their bachelor's degree.

Participant Selection Logic

The participants for this study were to be purposeful sampling due to characteristics (Cresswell et al., 2018). Purposeful sampling ensured only African American women over the age of 25 years old, independent status, employed, and in pursuit of a degree were selected for this research project. Capturing these lived

experiences for both participants and others who may identify or have some of the same characteristics is imperative. Morales (2014), in his follow-up to qualitative research involving 50 students, shared the information learned will assist with the growing number of minority students and their unique challenges.

The goal of this study was to interview at least 5 but not more than 10 participants. Participants were recruited via Facebook, and Walden University's Participant Pool. A small group provided the opportunity to thoroughly analyze the information gathered to highlight the lived experiences of this specific group of students.

The criteria were:

- African American woman
- Twenty-five years of age or older
- Independent status / Head of Household
- Dependent children or spouse
- Employed
- College Student

Semistructured ,face-to- face interviews are the preferred method for information gathering; however, due to the online learning environment, video interviews will be substituted.

Number of Expected Participants and Recruitment

The number of expected participants was 5 to 10. Creswell et al., (2018) supported this number of participants for a qualitative study. Additionally, Ashtroth et al. (2018) further explains when considering the number of participants, saturation is an

important factor. It was imperative to gather and code data efficiently to determine when saturation has occurred.

Data Collection

After obtaining approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), an announcement was posted on Facebook and the Walden Participant Pool. Once the participant expressed interest an email was sent with the IRB approved consent form. Once this process was initiated, interviews were scheduled, and the data was collected based on those interviews. The source of data was participants themselves based on the information they provided. Due to the online platform of all Walden University, data was collected via audio conferencing. Individual interviews were preferred. Permission to record was requested. Participants were provided with a specific pin number for identification during the interview process.

Interviews were scheduled with flexibility. Interviews were between 30-60 minutes. All participants were asked to review their transcripts, and all agreed to do so. Depending on feedback from the chair and committee members, participants will be asked to consider follow-up interviews before final submission once the project is approved. Participants will be offered both individual and group debriefing.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research it is important to select an instrument for data collection that suits the project. There are several types of data analysis programs ranging from simple to more complicated multidimensional platforms. Because qualitative research is exploratory in nature it is imperative to capture what is said and incorporate a technique

to identify emerging themes based on interviews. It is more than just checking boxes from a limited number of choices that may occur during a survey format.

This research study will be conducted in a qualitative narrative approach. The data will be provided explicitly by the participant. Capturing what is said and meant by participants is imperative to research. Interpreting and explaining the data is done through thorough analysis. Creswell et al. (2018), provided several steps to data analysis in qualitative research. Those steps will be considered for analysis of this research study. Those steps include preparing. In the preparation stage involves careful consideration of all data received. The next several steps involve data coding. In these steps the data will be coded, codes will be reviewed to check for overlapping codes. Next the data will be grouped into themes and analyzed for commonalities. A theme will be a category that emerges as the result of data provided by participants. Creswell et al. (2018) points out that researchers should consider separating the data into what the researcher expected, the data that surprised the researcher, and what seems unusual. The last steps include arranging the codes from general to specific and then writing the narrative to explain findings.

In a Google search of available systems for qualitative data analysis, a top 10 best list, including the already recommended choices of Jotform, goCANVAS, and NVivo were listed. Realizing qualitative data is non-numerical, there must be special care when considering a tool that will provide the best analysis of interview material via transcription after interviews are completed. The first step in the process will include a

timestamp of the interaction and distinctions made between the researcher and participant responses.

During the interview phase, I took notes as well as asked permission to record the interactions with participants. The recording ensured all information was captured, noted, and included for interpretation. Liehr et al. (2020) noted the importance of being able to reread or revisit stories to capture individualism and everything said. The recording will also allow for comparison with my notes, minimizing information being missed or left out. Once interviews were transcribed, resilience skills, risks, and protective factors were extracted to identify clusters as well as cross-referencing data identified by more than one student.

As shared by Creswell et al. (2018), organizing, preparing, and reading all data is imperative to the analysis process. Coding will not occur until all data has been analyzed and is determined by the researcher to be inclusive of all results. Any differing themes will be addressed in other sections including but not limited to conclusions or identification of suggested future research.

Once the manual transcription is complete, descriptive interviews will be coded of students' lived experiences in Nvivo. Nvivo software allows for the color coding of information for preliminary theme or occurrence identification, for analysis of interviews, written material, and other participant information (Babbie, 2017).

Issues of Trustworthiness

In this qualitative study, trustworthiness includes validity, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The quality of the study is of the utmost

importance. Face validity will allow for the measurement of how many times a specific theme or factor is shared by each participant. If a theme is recurring, then a reasonable assumption is the protective factor or skill is valid in assisting students to move forward in their pursuit of graduation (Babbie, 2017). External auditing attributed to the validity and trustworthiness of this research and will be completed by Walden University representatives.

Credibility

Credibility was addressed by incorporating member checks, prolonged engagement triangulation, data saturation, reflexivity, and peer reviews. Member checks ensure participants are represented as they intend while assuring that what is meant to be measured is represented (Babbie, 2017). This was accomplished by providing opportunities for stakeholders to review their transcribed data (Creswell et al., 2018). Participants reviewed their interviews for accuracy and were allowed to explain or correct the intended meaning. Secondly, prolonged engagement is a necessary action. Building trust occurred during the initial stages of the researcher-participant relationship. I am a nontraditional African American women student and should avoid reading between the lines or inputting my own experiences by adding to what participants share. It was helpful to ask clarifying questions to specifically record what a participant means rather than assuming.

Triangulation is also necessary to establish a credible research project. During the triangulation process it was important to compare information as well as findings to past literature, researcher observations and member checks (Merriam et al., 2016; & Rubin et

al., 2012). Data saturation is imperative and will be determined by recurring themes, and no new information is provided by participants. In addition, credibility is seen as an ongoing process. During participant selection, data collection, coding, and findings, a journal of the process will be maintained to ensure reflexivity. Reflecting will allow for a thorough review of my thoughts and feelings for analysis and clarity of participant meaning rather than illuminating my own. Questions that arise during the process will also be documented. Lastly, all information from prework through the findings will be reviewed by the dissertation committee, peer reviewers, and other university representatives prior to approval of findings.

Transferability

Transferability involves listening intently and providing a detailed description of information shared by participants (Ruben & Rubin, 2012). This is also known as thick description. Patton (2015) notes interpreting and describing intricate experiences is imperative to adequately sharing lived experiences the way participants want their information shared. As the researcher, it is also necessary to ask probing as well as follow-up questions and actively listen to the answers.

In addition, self-reflection will occur often, and any researcher's interpretation of data will be noted. Adding to the notion of transferability is the idea of diverse sampling. For the purposes of this research study, I will attempt to include variety within the parameters of the population. Those may include ages, challenges, and work status within the target population. In terms of the data, information and findings provided will be

descriptive so others may follow-up or duplicate the research study (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell et al., 2018; Merriam et al., 2016).

Dependability

An audit trail and reflexive practices will foster dependability. A detailed and organized process for collecting and analyzing data was in place. The process includes how participants were recruited, transcribing interviews one at a time and immediately as time permits. Scheduling interviews will include a considerable amount of time between participants to allow for the review of information of everyone. This process will also include notations made by me during the interview phase and when analyzing the data. Reflexive journaling and an audit trail are listed as appropriate means of dependability (Lincoln et al., 1985). Inquiry auditing is also important for dependability. To ensure inquiry auditing can be performed transparency in steps taken for the research project must be documented. Accuracy of the processes ensures others such as consultants will be able to review for accuracy. Reflexive journaling will aid in this process.

Confirmability

Documenting any bias in the form of reflective practice will assist with confirmability. Acknowledging my own experiences as a nontraditional African American woman college student and separating those from information shared by participants is imperative. This can be done through triangulation which could include checking transcripts against interviews and other data for mistakes. Audit trails and reflexive journaling are also important to confirmability. Revisiting the information, to include research thoughts and feelings, during the process will allow the opportunity for

the researcher and others to make sure information shared by participants is relayed in the findings.

Limitations

Participants will be selected based on specific characteristics. Due to the need to minimize based on specific members of the student body, there are limits. While the sample size limitations are acknowledged, efforts were made to mitigate potential biases through reflexivity and transparent reporting of the process. For qualitative narrative research, the number of participants was reduced for this study. Based on the online nature of the university in-person interviews were not conducted which may restricted participants to those visiting social media sites. This limited the verification process for identifying candidates who met the criteria.

Recruiting entails students giving up their time to meet with me for an interview. Nontraditional African American women college students already have very little free time. While they may want to share their stories, there may not be enough time in their already busy schedules for an interview. Because I am also a nontraditional African American woman college student, I must make sure I recognize and address any bias. Merriam et al. (2016) suggest constant reflection during coding data. It will be imperative to the research study that bias is noted and accounted for in the findings. Ensuring a clear separation of my role at the institution from my role as the researcher may also be a challenge.

The findings of this research will be limited to the population at Walden University and may not apply to other colleges or universities. The study is interview-

based and noted to be the student's perception of their experiences. I am not able to control the level of honesty or their feelings during interviews or interactions. In addition, I was unable to control whether participants complete the process to include follow-up interviews.

Ethical Procedures

Ethics are important to research and include considerations of systems, participants, and researchers. The American Psychological Association (APA) provides guidance to include research and ethical considerations in research (APA, 2017). Because this research involves human beings, it will be subject to approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and several other levels of Walden University representatives including the research ethics office.

In addition, the APA Ethics Code: APA, 2017a; will be adhered to. It is imperative that confidentiality and permissions are obtained from all stakeholders, all efforts are made regarding harm reduction to participants, and no relationship is exploited. This will be provided through informed consents that will be signed by each participant. Consent will address the nature of the study, interview recording, security of data, and details of confidentiality. Participants will be provided information related to the research, and questions will be answered freely and honestly by the researcher.

In addition, permission to perform the study will be obtained through Walden's IRB consents will be signed voluntarily, and all participants will be given permission to decline or withdraw from the project at any time. The importance of anonymity and feelings of vulnerability were highlighted by Taquette et al. (2022). No personal

identifiable information will be noted without the participant's permission, and data will be grouped whenever possible. Participants will also be offered an identification number only known to them and the researcher. Participants will be treated with dignity and respect. The researcher will abide by ethical guidelines, ensuring to avoid or minimize harm to participants as described in the APA ethical code (APA, 2017 3.10/8.03).

Data will be maintained for a period of 5 years in a locked folder in the researchers' home and on the computer. All computers and online files unique to this research will be password-protected. For recordings, there will be a password to access and permission to enter the interview only allowed by the researcher and the participant. Those recordings will be maintained until the research is approved or a time period set by the research committee or IRB.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students. The theoretical framework is resilience theory based on Garmezy's work with schizophrenics and their families (Shean, 2015). As a result of his research positive influences were found to provide protective barriers against adversity and have been further highlighted in work by researchers such as Morales (Morales, 2014). A focus on positive influences known as protective factors will assist in explaining what African American women focus on to overcome challenges associated with their college experiences. Understanding both their challenges and protective factors may help to support this group of students in their pursuit of higher education goals.

Chapter 4 will provide an in-depth look at the research findings and lived experiences of each participant. Insight into the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students and their process for identification and applying of protective factors fostering resilience will be highlighted. Information related to their current status, as well as any dropouts and restart of college, will be shared in detail. Data collection and analysis will also be discussed. In addition, the results of the study will be presented, answering questions and data to support each finding.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students and identify the skills utilized to contribute to their retention and increased graduation rates. This study was guided by Garmezy's resilience theory. In this theory, it was determined that protective factors were imperative to recovery and development of resilience skills. His theory further explains that these protective factors can be grouped. Those groups include individual, family, and environmental/community influences which aid in the development of resilience that when employed by individuals to assist the process of overcoming adversity highlights the aspect of recovery. (Shean, 2015). This study was qualitative with a narrative approach to allow the participants to share experiences in their own words. One research question was used to guide the study:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional, African American women college students and what are resilience skills that contribute to their retention and graduation from college?

In this chapter, I will describe the interview setting and participant demographics. I will also discuss the data collection and the data analysis, highlighting themes and patterns that arose because of the analysis. Lastly, I will also discuss the evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary.

Setting

Initially, participants who volunteered to take part in the study were provided a combination of dates and times of availability to choose from for their interviews. In addition, they were asked what audio platform they preferred. The offerings were Zoom, or Microsoft Teams and Zoom was the choice. Overwhelmingly, participants allowed me to set up times, dates, and Zoom so in the last few weeks when consent was provided, I forwarded a time, date, and Zoom link proactively adding that these could be changed if needed. Allowing them to suggest a time and date would add to the comfort of the experience. This also provided them with the opportunity to select a place to ensure the privacy and location that would offer them the most comfort while they shared their stories. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio recorded.

All participants appeared to be in a place of comfort during the interaction. In some instances, there appeared to be technical interference as I and the participant asked if we could be heard. Once this was confirmed the interviews continued. There were no interruptions during our time together. Participants spoke freely about their past experiences. Interviews began with a researcher introduction and brief synopsis of the research subject and how our time would be spent. I also shared my appreciation for the interviewee, provided an agenda, and asked if there were additional questions before starting.

Demographics

This study sought to interview nontraditional African American women college students. All participants had to be 25 years of age or older. Participants were expected to

live in a variety of geographical locations due to the distance learning structure of Walden University as well as the online nature of the Facebook groups. Three of the four participants were seeking doctorate degrees while 1 participant was pursuing an undergraduate degree. All participants shared having children with two participants having adult children now and two having children under 17 years of age. All participants shared that they had dependent children at some point during their time as college students. All participants confirmed their age to be 26 or older. Basic demographic information appears in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant number	Race	Age range	Degree level
Participant 1	African American	36 - 55	Post-Graduate
Participant 2	African American	25 - 35	Undergraduate
Participant 3	African American	56 +	Post-Graduate
Participant 4	African American	56 +	Post-Graduate

There were three participants who either were or had been married and one was undetermined as this information was not shared by the interviewee.

Data Collection

This research study sought to collect data from at least five but not more than ten participants. Although over 80 potential participants responded, once vetted there were only four determined to meet the specific criteria for the study. Recruitment efforts were extensive and included several attempts to identify communities that offered the best chances to increase participation. The majority of those showing interest were determined to be under the age requirement or they were traditional students. After conducting the

four interviews it was determined the breadth of information included rich, detailed accounts of their lived college experiences. In addition, after the fourth and final interview was conducted there appeared to be no new data alluding to data saturation.

After carefully reviewing interviews and carefully coding there appeared to be consistency in themes across participants. The results of these in-depth narratives produced a comprehensive understanding of resilience skills and strategies utilized by nontraditional African American women college students. I specifically observed the importance of familial, individual, and environmental themes throughout their narratives. The same key themes such as perseverance, the development of self-efficacy, the important role of family relationships, and the role of community were repeatedly highlighted across interviews.

Participant's responses aligned with the themes extracted There was no significant new information or perspectives shared. Both Naeem et al., (2024) and Subedi (2023) reiterate data saturation occurs when there appears to be no new information, coding, or themes previously identified by the researcher. Data saturation was carefully considered once at this time and while additional interviews could have yielded further unique perspectives information obtained provided a solid foundation to address the research question and meet the objectives of this study. The decision was carefully made to conclude data collection at the four interviews due to the study's scope, limited resources, and the richness of the data gathered. Table 2 lists how all participants shared unique experiences that at some point derived from at least one element of each protective factor category.

Table 2*Identified Protective Influences*

Protective Influence	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Individual	X	X	X	X
Family	X	X	X	X
Environment	X	X	X	X

The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes as opposed to the 45 – 60 minutes I expected. Participants seemed relaxed and eager to share their information throughout the process. This of course was after a slow start of qualified participant interest.

The participants all agreed to have their interviews audio-recorded via Zoom. Participants were made aware of this research study via the Walden Participant Pool, and Facebook, as well as volunteering to provide flyers to others for snowball sampling. No interviews were conducted as a result of snowball sampling. A flyer was created with basic research information and posted on the Walden Participant Pool website and Facebook groups. Once all participants returned their consent forms, interview dates and times were scheduled.

Just as previously discussed all data was collected as the result of semi-structured interviews. This collection method aligns with the narrative format chosen as it allows participants to share their information as a result of open-ended questions. In Chapter 3 data collection was determined to be from participants themselves based on the information they provide. This process held true. The participants are the only source of data for the research question. All participants were provided with a PIN for referencing

their transcript as well as when communicating with the researcher in the future. The transcripts were saved with the same unique PIN.

During data collection, I did not expect to have more than 5 participants. Nor could I have anticipated the depth of information the four participants would share. All interviews for data collection occurred between February 2024 and April 2024. Due to the nature of the interview platform, it is possible that participants were not as honest about their qualifying for the study as they would be in a face-to-face interview environment with additional parameters.

Data Analysis

Garmezy's resilience theory found that a higher number of protective factors influences the ability to overcome adversity. In an additional work by Morales (2010), it is noted that protective factors assist in mitigating the risk factors of students in academic settings. Morales (2010; 2011) was able to group responses from 50 students in what is known now as clusters. These clusters provided insight into what may assist minority students in achieving their goal of graduation. Recognized as protective in nature, these factors include individual, family, and environment just as those referenced by Garmezy's resilience theory. Garmezy, Morales, and Tinto all determined that there was not one specific factor or characteristic to build resilience. All three felt it necessary to consider a variety of traits and influences to increase the likelihood of building resilience. These influences include the individual, familial as well as societal/external supports that aid in fostering resilience skills and are used as a guide for this study as well (Chrysikos, 2017; Morales, 2010; 2015, Shean, 2015).

The primary source of information was the participants in this study. I knew that coding would be difficult but did not have a frame of reference. The first interview was paramount in determining themes but without comparative data, nothing was finalized and no conclusions could be drawn. Coding appropriately is an important part of qualitative research and is not easy (Riazi et al., 2023). The second interview offered different circumstances, more academic and life experiences, and something to compare. Both interviews mentioned adversity and then when reviewing the audio transcripts I noticed participants' use of I or but I during our discussion and a theme emerged.

Participants referenced what they did to make changes or what they did to adapt to challenges and continue their studies. A parent became ill and one participant said I dropped out of school but I always knew I would return, another spoke of a discouraging grade, and buckling down to graduate. These were indicative of a broader theme that when grouped forms individual factors. The next interviews were listened to carefully and individually coded as factors. The participants described an intrinsic drive to accomplish their goals whether for personal fulfillment or to set an example for children and their communities. This process was used to form the remaining two overarching themes of family and environmental factors.

I also created a color-coded table for visual identification and easy recognition of interviews and coding using the established protective factors of individual, family, and environment. I highlighted areas where the interviewee mentioned family members, used I statements, or environmental influences. It is important to note that environmental for

the purpose of this research study includes anything or anyone not considered family or internal to the participant.

The categories also assisted when determining additional sub categories, concerning saturation. In the end, the three overarching themes were solidified and all other information was made subgroups as they fell into the purview of already established themes. This process further led me to highlight the individual factors: self-efficacy, self-motivation, grit/determination, as imperative to academic success. With regards to the family theme, mothers, and children were discussed by all participants, and for environmental religion and university professors stood out.

Another consideration when conducting interviews is nonverbal communication and although I could not physically see some of those gestures or cues I could listen for tone of voice, laughter, and hesitancy. One participant paused and said “I am unsure if I should say this...” when referencing discrimination and I reassured her she could and it was important to the research. I was reminded at that point for resilience to occur there must be adversity. This sharing led to stories of how she used the adversity as a reminder to keep pushing to achieve her academic goals.

Although on the surface I am representative of the group I chose to interview for this study; I decided to incorporate a suggestion by Colton, 2023 that as the researcher I should look for what was expected, what surprised me, and what seemed unusual as another lens to which analysis is interesting. For this research study, I found that I had no real expectations of stories that would surface and I had no idea of the depth of sharing that would occur; however, during my review of participant narratives, I was surprised

that race was brought up by two participants as a risk factor that was counteracted by the individual asserting an individual protective factor, determination to overcome and move forward in their educational journey.

Another such instance was discrimination noted by one participant related to her job title, and yet another participant who was told she would fail due to becoming pregnant while attempting to obtain her degree. In these instances, participants shared, they used this information and became more determined to accomplish their academic goals. During the analysis process themes were coded as individual, familial, and environmental as shown in Table 2. In the subsequent sections, the top three themes for each protective factor group will be shared along with supportive comments.

Results

Individual Factors

In Chapter two, I pointed out that positive cognitive emotional regulation, motivation, and perseverance were internal protective factors (Braund et al., 2020; Tope-Banjoko et al., 2020). This continues to be an important aspect for participants. During interviews participants were asked to share what their motivation was for attending college as well as how they came to be in college.

Overwhelmingly, participants shared their ability to stay on the course, achieving their higher education goals. They frequently used I statements when discussing how they managed to stay in college even after being out for as long as 10 years or when they were disappointed in their performance. With regards to their perseverance participants shared

some examples to illustrate their experiences. Participant 4 indicated that, “I quit and I return and I quit and I returned and I finally finished.” Participant 4 stated:

I became a little bit too independent, so I was there for school, but I was not doing school necessarily. At the end is when I kinda kicked into gear but at this point its kinda too late so I said let me just graduate but what I did do after I graduated, I did find a program and went on to get a 2nd bachelor’s degree.

Another participant, Participant 3, stated:

You know especially when I had to start working and going to school, along the line getting pregnant I faced a lot of stress, sometimes when I want to read I will be feeling sleepy or I had to reassure myself that very soon it would be better I had to to set an example for my child if I want succeed. I had to change my pattern of reading, instead of reading at night I read during the day when I am free, I also eat vegetables to help me stay strong, drink a lot of water when I feel like I want reading time and that helped me.

While Participant 1 told me that:

I had that opportunity to redeem myself through the 2nd bachelors I saw school differently so I had different techniques of getting classes and knowing how to hit it hard in the beginning so if I had a little slip up here and there I wouldn’t go down to far and I wasn’t fighting to climb up the mountain like I was at the top of the mountain I kinda slid back a little bit but its not far that I gotta climb back up ya know.

Even with regards to this interview process, one participant graduated after the cutoff set to qualify for this study. I was in the process of letting her know that she did not meet the criteria when Participant 3 said:

Sorry can I explain myself? I was 20 years old when I graduated from high school. Things happened where I didn't get to start school early enough. I had some problems with speaking so I was enrolled in speech therapy that you know it took some time before I started talking so that's why I didn't graduate early.

The aforementioned comment came from a participant who persevered to provide her story during the interview. She also thanked me for giving her the opportunity to share her triumph to get into college. She had something to say and wanted me to know.

Motivation

Motivation was described as internal thoughts, processes, and beliefs that influence reactions and outcomes in educational settings in chapter two. Participants shared stories of motivation during their interviews. In fact, during the interactions, I asked some if there was an innate quality or skill they could share and while there was no unique word for what they were describing the idea that they relied heavily on themselves, internal thoughts, or reminders of what they had to do resonated. This is what grit and maintaining a growth mindset reminds me of. Having an open mind to accomplishing more than the standard or norm has been important to these participants.

Participants remind themselves why they are doing this, why they are continuing to enroll and reenroll in college. They do these things for themselves, their children, other

family members as well as their communities but the work is done by them. Participant 1 stated:

I did do after I graduated I did find a program and went on to get a 2nd bachelors degree and at that point now I am an older student I am married had some more life experiences so moving on to get that 2nd bachelors degree and it was like ok I did much better I enjoyed what I was working on because at this point now I was kinda knew what it was that I wanted to do and I had an understanding what I was truly interested in and how I could use it later so I was able to do that very well I call that my redemption year I did much better than the bare minimum so from there I graduated by this point I am working in the federal government as a student worker but once I graduated.

Perseverance is seen as the ability to work through undesirable situations to complete a goal. It may also be classified as a student's ability to apply grit or a growth mindset to situations to move past obstacles. Braund et al. (2020) described grit as a personal attribute worthy of further study to understand a mother's ability to successfully remain in college. A growth mindset is being open-minded to one's abilities or untapped skills. Hard work contributes to overcoming believed failures to keep trying or working towards academic goals (Kim et al., 2022; Rothes et al., 2022). Working to reframe is imperative to reaching goals that, at times, seem impossible. Motivation is key. When asked about it, Participant 1 shared:

Yeah it's the goal that drives me and I've always had this confidence in myself that I get whatever I want. It may not be given to me. I'm not spoiled in a sense

but I'm gone get what I want and that's one of the things that drives me like even now in this program there's been about 4 instances where I'm like I think this could be it I think I'm just gone be done and just walk away and then something will happen or that silent the little subtle motivation that people don't realize that they give you and I'm like oh ok I can do it then like recently my mom passed over the summer, I've lost a sister during this program, my mom passed you know parents just changing getting older their life happening and I'm always like I don't think I can do this anymore and I'm like let me just stop then I'm like I'm more than halfway done so you really can't just stop you gotta just keep going.

Familial Factors

Morales's work also revealed parents' authoritative parenting style, high parental expectations supported by words and actions, and mother modeling strong work ethic as familial protective factors (Morales, 2010). Mushonga et al. (2020) further highlighted the importance of social support for nontraditional African American students. For African Americans in college, it is a protective factor necessary for success (Mushonga, 2020). Participant 3 shared:

I got pregnant was one of the challenges I faced, I when the support wasn't coming in like I thought so I had to start working, along the line I got pregnant. At one point I felt like I was going to drop out and maybe continue later I was very like bottom of area but, my partner was very very supportive, that helped me to go through.

Another participant, Participant 4, shared:

Another thing that encourages me are my children. They are grown and I'm trying to encourage them to go for their doctorates. And, you know, and My experience, I think my son helped me out a couple of times with some issues that I was having like. Oh, I'm so tired. I'm so tired. He said, "Well, Mom. You've got to be organized. You've got to set your priorities. And he was right, you know, because the things that he was going through just for his masters, I said, you, you sound more like a, you know, you're going through a doctoral program. But his experience in the graduate area was more positive than his undergraduate area. I'm so proud of him and he's proud of himself.

Participant 4 told me, "My mom didn't have a college degree so when she heard that I wanted to start school, she was very happy and she had to support me, she was there to take care of me and my baby."

One participant, Participant 1, realized during the course of the interview that her mom was also a nontraditional student sharing:

So my mom went back to school when I was maybe in the 5th grade. She had a career was a nurse but as far as going to college and having an academic degree she wasn't. Nursing is a license right so you can get your license and you are good to go for a while but she decided to go back to school.

This participant recalled going to class with her mom and then in later years she took her son to class with her as it was what she had to do at the time.

Environmental Factors

In McGuire (2020), MSIs or minority-serving institutions were discussed as having a positive influence on students of color and mitigating the challenges they face. The systems in place should address the needs of the culture of nontraditional minority students (Milovanska-Farrington, 2020). This mirrors information related to caring school personnel, social groups, and organizations, as well as school-sponsored tutoring services to address challenges such as lack of preparedness, sense of belongingness, and motivation (Morales, 2010). Both identifying with the Black race and spirituality are associated with the ability to cope and act as a buffer in the college environment (Mushonga et al., 2020). All participants relied on environmental protective factors. There were some that all four shared as important. Those included religion/church, professor/faculty members, and peers/classmates they meet along their higher education journey.

Religious/Church Factor. Participants mentioned both God and the church as being an influence in their educational goals. Some shared while they may not have had college influences at home they had those influences at church. Others shared they remember thanking God when something was accomplished. Yet another participant shares as a means of self-care and motivation they read devotionals and utilize prayer lines. While these are all different means of incorporating religion, all participants mentioned a relationship with people in church, God/faith. Thanking God when something was accomplished or mentioning church/prayer as part of their community or coping.

- Participant 3 told me that, “So, I had stress so God help me I was able to go through.”
- Participant 1 indicated that:
 - I mean initially it was always the ego and the sense of status for me to be able to come back home to my community, my church, my family and friends and say yeah I have a degree yeah I graduated you know, just to be able to be at that level.
- Participant 1 said, “You know people in my church and the community and seeing things they had done and they would talk about college and what not. It never felt foreign to me although my mom didn’t have college stories to tell me.”

Professor, Faculty, Staff Factors. Another relational protective factor stems from the university itself. These are not necessarily programs but people who have aided in assisting students to stay in or reenroll in college. Participants praised their relationships with faculty, peers, and staff during their journey. Participant 1 said:

I had a professor I’ll never forget sitting in her class and she told us her story about going to school and failing and they asked her to leave you ain’t doing nothing here it’s time for you to go and she went home and she was from a factory town and she said that she ended up getting a job at a factory and she was coming home and getting ready for work and coming back home and getting ready for work the next day and she said it became so monotonous it got to the point that she didn’t know what day it was sometimes she just knew whether or

not she has to go to work and one day she got up like this is crazy I don't have a life and I can't live like this and I don't want to live like this so that's when she reenrolled in school and she went back to school and eventually she got her PhD and as she went on with the story I was like man she fell all the way outta school. I'm not bout to fail but, I am close but I'm not you know I am not going to. If she can get a Phd I can get a PhD and so that is exactly how it birthed. Unfortunately I wanted to like surprise her with it and tell her all about it but she passed away the semes/quarter I started. So I was like daggone so I tell her daughter all the time. I keep her daughter posted about what's happening.

Participant 4 told me:

It was hard the first time to when we met, you know, first time I heard his voice. I didn't know anything about him. But. And he's the second chair. The first chair. It just wasn't, I just wasn't comfortable, you know. I just felt like something is not right. And at that time I didn't know I had an academic advisor. Now I have an academic advisor and I take very much advantage of that because if there's a problem that I have with you know, conflicts or anything I call and talk to him about it. He helps me, you know.

Peers/Classmate Factor. With regards to classmates/peers participants shared:

- Participant 1 said:
 - But a lot of times I found it was my students my peers in class who were sorta another support system like they were a little, they were still a little younger and even in the master's program we had a lot of students who were truly straight out of school I think I had one or two

people that were even close to my age and they were still a little younger but with that program I was able to get advice and help with technology stuff, they were like oh get this computer this one's better and the campus has this program and the campus has that program so it was very helpful there and a lot of us still have a bond today even though that's been like 10-12 years ago we still have that bond because they were very supportive.

- Participant 1 indicated that:
 - I was pregnant with him I didn't take classes I didn't start back up until I had him and a couple of people who had gone on and a couple people, I was like you still here and she was like yeah I had to take a break and I was like I took a break like we didn't even realize we took a break at the same time and it was like cook you know although I started out with these people I still ended up with them at graduation, we were all sitting together at graduation, and that was pretty nice.
- Participant 1 said:
 - Calling a classmate saying if you get to class before me save me a seat by the door cause I have to bring the baby so if anything happens I can just roll him out real quick if I have to. I called the lady and let her know I'm not gonna bring him tonight because I am not gonna make it in time and all this and he did great in class my classmate loved him.

As pointed out in previous chapters, there must be adversity for resilience skills to be identified and sustained. This is no different for the participants in this study. They all

faced challenges but have been able to overcome those with the implementation of protective factor buffering. The top three challenges faced include three challenges shared include: financial struggles faced by three of the four participants, racial discrimination was faced by two of the four, two of the three shared were racially discriminated against by an employer, while a third participant shared she was discriminated against by college peers when she became pregnant and caring for ill family members was shared by three of the four participants including the death of both or at least one parent while attending college. Despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles these nontraditional African American women students have continued their quest for college education even beyond the level of an undergraduate degree.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility was addressed by incorporating member checks, prolonged engagement triangulation, data saturation, reflexivity, and peer reviews. Member checks ensured participants were represented as they intended while assuring that what is meant to be measured is represented (Babbie, 2017). Member checks were performed in this study by transcribing the interview and forwarding the document to the participant to verify. Once this was done all participants were asked to respond via email with the word accurate to ensure the conversation was representative of the individual and our conversation.

To date, I have received information from all but one participant. Providing the data to participants for their review was done as a recommendation by Creswell et al.,

2018. Participants were informed of the opportunity to review their interviews for accuracy before the end of our time together. Secondly, prolonged engagement was established throughout the process. Once a participant shared their interest, I attempted to respond within 48 hours thanking them for their interest and forwarding a copy of the consent form for their review. The practice of responding timely was done throughout the process to ensure participants I was aware and appreciative of their time. I wanted to establish a relationship with participants before the interview and I believe this was done. Responding quickly and respectfully also helped in building trust which should occur during the initial stages of the researcher-participant relationship. Prolonged engagement was extended beyond the interview when working with participants to check their transcripts for validity. In one instance I forwarded a transcript after the time frame I allotted. I apologized for the delay and explained the circumstances to the participant. The idea of being transparent let the participants know that I appreciated and respected their input.

I am a nontraditional, African American women student and avoided reading between the lines. I asked clarifying questions through the interaction with participants. I was also able to ask questions based on my experiences or inputting my own experiences which prompted participants to add additional valuable information. Both clarifying and shared experiences were helpful in specifically recording what a participant meant rather than assuming.

It is also important to point out that all participants did not experience the same category of adversity. One such instance is discrimination. Participants discussed this as a

significant risk factor. One participant faced discrimination when she became pregnant and her peers would discuss her not making it through college due to her being pregnant. A professor stepped in and shared the story of success stating his wife became pregnant while in college and went on to graduate. The participant stated if she can do it I can too. Another participant faced discrimination when being passed over for a job due to the color of her skin. She shared that a coworker stepped in sharing words of motivation and kindness. She decided she would go back to school after this encounter to increase her chances of career advancement. Both the professor and the coworker assisted in helping these participants move past their adverse situation building resilience skills via protective factors. Both students demonstrated remarkable resilience using their determination and self-efficacy to overcome these obstacles and persist in their academic goals. Their narratives serve as a poignant reminder of the multifaceted nature of the resilience strategies employed by this student population.

In addition, while discrimination was not shared by all participants I acknowledged this was one instance that caused significant interviewer reflection due to my status as a nontraditional African American woman college student. This self-reflection allowed me the opportunity to ensure I did not minimize nor maximize the experiences of the participants. I revisited the audios ensuring I was able to share participants' views and how they navigated these experiences adding to the credibility of the resilience strategies. I engaged in critical self-reflection making a concerted effort to explore the experiences of the participants and not my own.

All participants shared instances where protective factors assisted with adversity. At one point during their academic careers circumstances forced them to rely on inherent abilities or some outside buffer but with that in mind I must point additional situations where these participants differ. In response to caretaking responsibilities or death of a loved one, three of the four participants have experienced the death of a loved one, a parent, a spouse, or a sibling. In examining how they responded to this extreme adversity, one participant shared she could not function and dropped out of school while others managed to stay in school with assistance from friends, a partner, and their mother. One participant did not experience challenges with regards to grades; however others did and as result finances suffered and even though she wanted to return to school she had to be responsible for those fees prior to her return. It was her determination that assisted her focus on paying the funds off in order to reenroll in college.

It is also important to point out that all participants have children but only one mentioned how she was motivated specifically through words of encouragement from her child. Others shared that they do this in part for their children to motivate them. Lastly, only one participant not only cared for sick parents but also had to work through their own critical illness while in college. She shared she did this by remembering words of encouragement from those closest to her. While on the surface these participants may utilize protective factors in the same theme there protective factors and actual challenges are diverse.

While I did engage in strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the study there are limitations that should be noted. First and foremost I am a nontraditional African

American woman college student and because I am the sole researcher of this project my own biases and perspectives may have inadvertently influenced the interpretations of the participants' narrative. Despite my best efforts to approach the data with an open mind, it is possible that my personal experiences and assumptions shaped the way I perceived and made meaning of the information provided by the interviewee. Secondly, the study relied on a small homogeneous sample of four students, three of whom were seeking postgraduate degrees. They were able to provide valuable insights through rich data and in-depth interviews; however, their classification may impede the transferability of these findings to the broader population of nontraditional African American women college students, specifically those nontraditional African American women college students seeking undergraduate degrees. Larger scale studies with a more diverse sample could help expand upon the research themes identified in this study.

Triangulation is also necessary to establish a credible research project. During the triangulation process it was important to compare information as well as findings to past literature, researcher observations, and member checks (Merriam et al., 2016; & Rubin et al., 2012). Past literature included information from Norman Garmazy, and Erik Morales. In their writings, both highlighted the importance of protective factors that assisted in mitigating adversity to build resilience skills that are important long term. In more recent literature Middleton et al., (2024) discuss the importance of family support and internal buffers to assist with building self-esteem in African American women college students. Woods-Giscombe et al., (2023) added personality, religion, are some supportive aspects that aid in overcoming adversity to build resilience. I analyzed participant interviews and

reviewed relevant scholarly literature which included, resilience theory, protective factors, and the experiences of nontraditional, African women college students. This process allowed me to compare and contrast emergent themes from data with the existing knowledge base. I maintained a step-by-step process from recruitment processes, to interviewee communication, while recording my journey during this process. In addition the audit trail serves as a transparent record of the decisions and actions during the study, which can be reviewed by external auditors to verify the consistency and reliability of the findings.

The four participants in this study have consistently overcome extreme adversity, employing protective factors that they were sometimes unaware of to move forward in the quest towards higher education. Individual, familial, and environmental protective factors play a critical role in fostering resilience of nontraditional African American women college students. The emergence of themes such as positive self-efficacy, determination/grit, and the ever-growing need for supportive university faculty, staff, and peers align with and extend the existing literature on the factors that contribute to the success of this student population.

Aligning with the findings of this research both Woods-Giscombe et al., (2023) and Middleton et al., (2023) also pointed out the value of social, and family support in African American women. Participants of this study specifically shared how important their mothers were both when they were children and in their adult lives. This aligns with Morales' (2010) work on the significance of authoritative parenting and strong family support in mitigating the risks associated with minority student's academic pursuits.

Other key elements to note are the descriptions by participants in how they reframed and overcame obstacles, such as financial struggles, and caretaking responsibilities by incorporating both individual and environmental protective factors which suggests that the development of resilience skills is an ongoing process that involves the interplay of various personal relational and contextual factors.

Data saturation was an intricate part of the process, imperative to coding and findings, and was determined by recurring themes, and no new significant information being provided by participants. In addition, focusing on credibility was seen as an ongoing process. During participant selection, data collection, coding, and findings, the journaling process assisted in ensuring reflexivity. Reflecting allowed for a thorough review of my thoughts and feelings for analysis and clarity of participant meaning rather than illuminating my own. Questions that arose during the process were also documented. Lastly, all information from prework through the findings was reviewed by the dissertation committee and other university representatives.

Transferability

Transferability involves listening intently and providing a detailed description of information shared by participants (Ruben & Rubin, 2012). This is also known as thick description. Patton (2015) noted interpreting and describing intricate experiences is imperative to adequately sharing lived experiences the way participants want their information shared. As the researcher, it was also necessary to ask probing as well as follow-up questions and actively listen to the answers. In addition, self-reflection occurred often, and rather than the researcher's interpretation alone, the data was

forwarded to the participant for clarification. There were two instances where I could not make out what was being said on the audio recording. I ensured those areas were highlighted on the transcript with a note for the interviewee to please correct, if possible, for me to update. The participants responded and provided the information which was then changed on the transcribed document. Adding to the notion of transferability is the idea of diverse sampling. For this research study, I attempted to include variety within the parameters of the population. Those included ages, challenges, and work status within the target population. In terms of the data, information and findings provided are descriptive so others may follow up or duplicate the research study (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell et al., 2018; Merriam et al., 2016).

Dependability

An audit trail and reflexive practices fostered dependability. A detailed and organized process for collecting and analyzing data was in place. The process for how participants were recruited, and transcription of interviews occurred one at a time, actively listening for detailed information related to the topic. Re-listening to areas in question or that were not clear during re-read also allowed me the opportunity to check for accuracy. Because I thought I would have a significant number of participants interviews were scheduled daily during the first weeks, once it was determined that not all interviewees met the characteristics an adjustment was made to ask initial questions to determine eligibility after a discussion with my committee chair regarding my encounters. Interviews were then scheduled to include a considerable amount of time

between participants to allow for the review of information of everyone. This process included notations made by me during the interview phase and when analyzing the data.

Reflexive journaling and an audit trail are listed as appropriate means of dependability (Lincoln et al., 1985). After reflecting on the initial disappointment and subsequent conversation with my chair, I added qualifying questions asking what year and state participants graduated from high school. Inquiry auditing is also important for dependability. To ensure inquiry auditing can be performed transparency in steps taken for this research project was documented. Accuracy of the processes ensures others such as consultants will be able to review for accuracy. Reflexive journaling will aid in this process. While my journaling was not often done the initial thoughts of disappointment were documented. I admit I was excited to have so many people express interest and wanted to interview as many as possible. This did influence the number of scheduled interviews per week a thought process that would have aided in organizing to create quality interview experiences.

While reflecting on the process of recruitment and interviewing I must admit the discouragement and feelings of despair when the first several participants did not meet the criteria of nontraditional student. This was mentioned earlier in the chapter but now I realize how it affected my interaction with one of my participants. With the adjustments of qualifying questions, I noted the year a participant graduated from high school. After the participant answered the question I was done speaking with her. I was giving my standard rejection speech when she paused and asked if she could explain herself. I was caught off guard but verified what she said and she repeated herself. She shared how she

had a problem with her speech and was delayed in school due to this. She further shared she never thought she would go to college but after she took the S.A.T. she was told to apply. I realized she was exhibiting determination during our conversation. She was determined to get her story out. At the end of our time together she expressed her gratitude for me allowing her the time to explain. That was a reality check. It was I who should have been grateful that she thought enough to volunteer for the research study, share her story, and especially give up her time to do so forcing me to remember why I wanted to do a qualitative study. I was reminded of an article previously referenced in this study that over 20% of students in one state are parenting but do the colleges and universities gather this information (The Education Trust-West, 2020)? I was a single-parenting student myself. Her words helped me to refocus. Who am I to judge her feelings or level of adversity or accomplishments? I am grateful that I allowed her to give me another chance.

Another area worthy of reflexive thought was the discussion about resilience. After revisiting transcripts, I wondered if I should defined it, provided participants with a textbook definition. More recently after further thought I realized for this study I wanted to extract resilience attributes during coding, not have an answer evolved from a textbook. This worked but was a little more complex than I could have imagined. When asking about the implementation of resilience skills only one participant asked me to provide an example. I decided to reiterate part of her interview where she discussed her job and how she was able to move past a challenge to achieve a goal. She recalled being

“broken but said she didn’t stay broken”. She was determined to change her circumstances. We both agreed this was an example of resilience.

Lastly, after listening to the first interview which lasted more than an hour, I felt the need to curtail my conversational input and focus on aspects of the questions to be more mindful of my participants' time. This was difficult as I wanted participants to feel comfortable and approach this interview like a conversation and not feel as if I was just throwing questions at them to answer. As pointed out earlier the interview time did average more than the 45 minutes I anticipated and no one complained about the time. All of them agreed it was worth the time to get their story out.

Confirmability

Documenting any bias in the form of reflective practice will assist with confirmability. Acknowledging my own experiences as a nontraditional African American woman college student and separating those from information shared by participants was imperative. This was done through triangulation which included checking transcripts against interviews and other data for mistakes. Admittedly, there were experiences shared by the researcher during interviews, but none that influenced the transcription process. The information transcribed and coded are the words of the participants. I also revisited information, to include the researcher's thoughts and feelings, during the process This allowed the opportunity for the researcher and others to make sure information shared by participants is relayed in the findings.

Results Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to (a) explore lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students; (b) identify what these students describe as risks to graduating; and (c) contribute to current literature focusing on the needs of this student population. The research question developed for this study asked participants about their lived experiences and what resilience factors emerged that increased their chances of graduating from college. It is important to engage directly with students who can provide a firsthand account of what it is like being a nontraditional African American woman college student.

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students and what resilience skills contribute to their retention and graduation from college?

There were 11 questions identified that would provide the most insight into protective factors used by participants. The initial 11 questions were adjusted in verbiage due to IRB input related to how participants could be recruited. Participants could not be solely recruited via the Walden Participant Pool; therefore, questions related to specifics related to Walden were adjusted. In addition, qualifying questions related to determining age, what year and state did you graduate from high school, were added to further increase the trustworthiness of the project due to an abundance of interviewees who were not over the age of 25 years. The 11 questions implemented were reviewed to read:

Interview questions:

1. Please introduce yourself and provide some background information.

2. Tell me about how you came to be in college/why you are continuing your higher education path.
3. What is your motivation for obtaining a college degree?
4. Is the college you enrolled in currently the first college you enrolled in?
5. What impacted your decision to attend a traditional or online college?
6. Have you faced any adverse situations/challenges in your pursuit of higher education?
7. Describe a current coping strategy for stressors and/or barriers to achieving your educational goals.
8. Tell me about your support system including how you apply the techniques/systems when faced with adversity.
9. What experiences with resilience skills contribute to their ability to persevere, enroll, and re-enroll to obtain a college degree?
10. Are there any other experiences related to your college experiences?
11. How do you feel about sharing your story?

As part of the data analysis, I highlighted the top protective factor themes that emerged as a result of the interviews. Those which stood out for the individual theme were positive self-efficacy, and determination/grit. For the environment the university faculty, staff, and classmates. Lastly, for the family, it was mom and children. This is not an all-encompassing list. Several other influences may seem small but to the individual participant, it may make a difference to continue an educational pursuit or not. An example of one such instance is coping skills. While no two participants shared the same

coping skills, going to the park, listening to music, praying, and spending time with family were deemed important. In addition, I would share that the protective factors have also been known to work as clusters as pointed out by Morales to increase resilience skills; thereby, providing a solid foundation to work through future adversity. Participants engage in protective factors sometimes succinctly. One participant shared they are involved in several prayer/devotional activities. Another shared they enjoy their outside hummingbird, and butterfly activities and they also enjoy sharing things with their granddaughter showing her new things. While these coping activities both seem to offer time to relax, maybe reflect, and even to rejuvenate they are vastly different. Participants were able to engage in self-care coping strategies and go on to continue pursuing their academic goals.

Not fully realizing how this journal was more than just writing seemed to come to fruition during the final phases of this research study. It is now that the importance of making notes and keeping transcripts at the forefront of this project culminates in the suggestions related to implications for practice. Services to consider for nontraditional African American women college students should be developed in the areas of academic support, university faculty and staff training, and even family support initiatives. Mentoring programs for students fostering resilience should include an introduction to a growth mindset, as well as, goal and time management activities for the development of positive self-efficacy and determination. University faculty and staff training in the areas of cultural pedagogy responsiveness, including topics related to creating a sense of belonging and effective communication skills geared toward the unique needs of this

group of students. Lastly, due to the challenges faced by these students in the areas of familial obligations, specific resource guides and support groups to include strategies that could support the academic journey of nontraditional African American women college students could prove imperative.

In the third theme environment was a stand-out protective factor. Participants shared their thankfulness to God and verbalized religion as a coping techniques in difficult times. This is indicative of the need for exploration of partnerships between local faith-based organizations, community centers, and caregiver organizations as a means of support, mentorship, and resource sharing.

Summary

Chapter 4 discussed how the research was to be conducted. The settings, demographics, and data collection. The process was not as straightforward as I thought when proposing the research study. While I did not deviate from the plan mentioned in previous chapters consultation did occur related to qualifying participants for the study. These questions were added due to inquiries from those who did not meet the criteria. The recruitment method changed as a result of feedback and I sought private social media groups rather than public ones. The number of desired participants changed; however, there was an abundance of in-depth information gathered from participants. This may be due in part to most of them having multiple degrees and therefore having more experiences to share. Their information is invaluable and adds to the growing literature related to the importance of the development of resilience in academics. The four participants narratives proved invaluable. Individual, familial, and environmental

protective factors are a necessary part of the development of resilience skills for nontraditional African American women college students. Chapter 5 begins with an interpretation and discussion of the findings as it relates to the theoretical framework in Chapter 2. Limitations of this study will also be presented as well as recommendations for future research, social change implications, and the conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students and identify protective factors that are utilized to contribute to their retention and increased graduation rates. Previous research suggested studying interventions that promote resilience and found that understanding experiences may foster academic achievement (Brogden et al., 2019; Kundu, 2019). The semi-structured interviews provided a platform for nontraditional African American women college students to highlight their experiences with motivation, persistence, coping strategies, and other positive influences that have aided in their retention increasing their chances of graduation. Participants emphasized the significance of sharing their personal narratives as a means of overcoming adversity. When asked how they felt about sharing their stories, their their comments included:

- I feel good, you know, whenever someone ask me or whenever im being asked the question when did I finish highschool and I tell someone about it or mention my age, they seem not to believe me or stuff like that but right from highschool through college, I feel proud of myself, bu ti didn't allow what people talked about me or way me down. Im very happy that you give me a listening ear to explain myself you know it shows me that someone understands me and yu are also one of those persons, I feel strong and I feel good. I think that someone out there was able to hear mystory and support me. (Participant 3)

- I could share my story with anybody I am gone tell you the truth, I am one who believes that closed mouths done get fed. Being fed is not my mouth being open to tell somebody what I'm doing, my mouth being open to receiving what's going. (Participant 1)
- Participant 3 said: "I feel great about sharing it with you, Hopefully, this can help other women, make them understand that their not alone in this world and maybe even encourage other wonen to pursue higher degrees."
- Participant 4 told me: "Oh, I'm very comfortable with it and you were a very open person and very supportive and understanding and it makes it easier to talk."

All participants felt comfortable and shared intimate details of their experiences.

This research study highlights the importance of protective factors. After the data analysis, it has become apparent that individual factors are imperative to the success of nontraditional African American college students. The standout themes include persistence to achieve the goal, and recalling information from past experiences for motivation. The information obtained can also influence changes that positively impact other students' experiences including their ability to stay the course (Cotton et al., 2017).

This research study confirms the idea that there must be adversity for resilience to occur. As apparent by the stories shared of motivation, determination, and challenges to include noneducational obligations, and that were mitigated by internal drive, family, friends who stepped in to care for children, turning toward faith when faced with a

seemingly insurmountable obstacle and even a memory of something said by a family member or a teacher sharing you can do it.

Interpretation of the Findings

Garmezy's resilience theory provided a blueprint for areas to focus on when attempting to mitigate challenges and adversity that could derail successes. In his work, Garmezy posits in adverse situations a positive influence makes a difference and the more adversity the greater opportunity for resilience skills to advance. The theory's development hinged upon unexplained thriving despite adverse circumstances. This research study attempts to add to the growing body of work identifying protective factors which are now known as buffers for risk factors. A focus on the positive instead of highlighting the adversity introduces or reminds struggling nontraditional African American women students of skills or other influences they have that will offer support during times of struggle.

By identifying specific instances of strength-based interactions, such as the role of familial support and internal motivation, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on resilience theory. Consistent with Garmezy's resilience theory, this study underscores the importance of protective factors in fostering resilience among nontraditional African American women college students a process reiterated by both Morales' work identifying protective factor clusters and Vincent Tinto's retention model which both focuses on positive influences to mitigate challenges. It is relationships with self, family, and/or the environment that offset seemingly insurmountable obstacles. All of which may be represented as normal interactions or attributes (Masten et al., 2021).

Nontraditional, African American women college students are continuing to enroll, reenroll, and graduate. There continues to be research focused on the challenges rather than triumphs of African American women students (Johnson et al., 2022). This study, while mentioning the challenges, focused highly on what factors motivated students, what they found helpful, and considerations when deciding to continue their education. Details also discussed in recent studies related to self-esteem and concepts of resilience by Middleton et al., (2023) and Woods-Giscombe et al., (2023) respectively.

Largely, these participants seemed not to have shared their experiences and showed appreciation for the opportunity to provide information that may be of use to others like them. A sentiment shared in Haynes (2022), for African American women to not suffer alone. The protective factors shared in this research shine a light on everyday interactions that can be used to mitigate adverse situations. Sharing experiences with others may provide the courage and determination needed to realize their goal of graduating from college.

Limitations of the Study

Chapter 1 limitations included a potential barrier when collecting primary data which included difficulty recruiting participants for interviews and subsequent coding for analysis. Ensuring a clear separation of my role at the institution from my role as the researcher proved not to be a challenge. The findings of this research targeted nontraditional African American women college students most of which had several degrees and may not be helpful to those nontraditional students currently seeking their

first degree. Three participants are currently working on their doctorate while only one is working towards their undergraduate degree.

Another limitation to consider is that the study is interview-based and noted to be the student's perception of their experiences. I was not able to control the level of honesty or participant feelings during interviews or interactions. The level of honesty related to meeting the basic criteria of this study was a challenge. During the first several interviews it appeared participants did not understand the age criteria or were unable to verbalize what the study was about in their own words. Additionally, I was unable to control whether participants completed the process to include verification of transcript accuracy for one interviewee.

Other limitations included participant selection based on specific characteristics. Due to the need to minimize based on specific members of the student body, there are limits. For qualitative narrative research, the number of participants is reduced for this study. No more than 10 students would have been considered, a number reduced to 4 based on the difficulty faced with recruitment. Based on the online nature of the university in-person interviews did not occur which further restricted participants to those visiting social media sites. While I considered other methods of recruitment due to time restraints, I did not pursue those avenues.

Recruiting entailed students giving up their time to meet with me for an interview. Nontraditional African American women college students already have very little free time. While they may have wanted to share their stories, there may not have been enough time in their already busy schedules for an interview. Because I am also a nontraditional

African American woman college student, I understand my challenges may be similar to the participants. Notating my feelings throughout the process, specifically the recruitment challenges could have caused extreme bias. Skills such as reflexivity helped to recognize and minimize biases. That skill was suggested by Merriam et al. (2016) during coding, and data analysis also. Reflexivity was employed throughout the research process, constantly reflecting on my perspective and assumptions. Ensuring a clear separation of my role at the institution from my role as the researcher was not a challenge. The findings of this research are limited to the distance learning population as all participants are now at online colleges. Additional limitations to consider include not asking direct questions about specific support and how they mitigated the academic risks.

Recommendations

Institutions could consider implementing support programs that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively assess the efficacy of existing interventions. It is recommended that researchers gather qualitative information on colleges and universities with a high percentage of enrolled and graduating nontraditional African American women. This research should specifically target colleges with high rates of returning nontraditional African American women college students and alumnae with safeguards in place to ensure confidentiality and verification of study qualifications.

Another recommendation is to explore current university programs geared towards nontraditional students and determine if those are suited for nontraditional African American women learners. Explore if those existing programs are proactively referenced, are utilized, and make a difference in retention and graduation rates.

One other recommendation focuses on the training of university staff and faculty. It should be noted that all participants in this study identified university faculty and staff as positive influences. Training should include an introduction to their important role during interactions, the unique needs of this population, and available resources.

Implications

There currently exists a major push to focus on positive interactions, outcomes, and coping strategies rather than on adversity. While it has been proven by many that resilience cannot exist without adversity, highlighting only the negative inspires hopelessness and despair. This research study sought to prove that there are common protective mechanisms available to us all and with a little encouragement applying this positive thought process goals can be achieved, and college degrees can be obtained.

Nontraditional African American women students face adversity at home, at work, and in their pursuit of higher education. Often, they keep to themselves and do not ask for help in any of these areas. During the in-depth interviews of this study, there appeared to be very little discussion indicating the participant asked for help. This study showed that nontraditional African American women rely on just about every aspect of their lives to draw strength and forge ahead to achieve their goals. They must share their stories of triumph to foster a sense of belongingness and encourage others to remember the goals they set and keep working on their achievements.

This study impacts positive social change. By identifying factors that promote resilience and academic success in nontraditional African American women students, institutes of higher learning can develop or improve support services tailored to this

population. These enhanced services could help increase retention and graduation rates for these students. The underrepresentation of nontraditional African American women in higher education makes this study necessary to provide insights that could inform practices aimed at empowering more students from this demographic to complete college. This first-hand knowledge will prove invaluable as it can be used in support of programs assisting nontraditional African American women college students. The social change implications of this study also include increased self-efficacy. Nontraditional African American women college students exposed to and utilizing protective factors and other resilience concepts will be able to draw on these skills when faced with adversity throughout their lifespan.

In addition, this study highlights the positive influences not always considered in everyday life. Participants mentioned that statements made to them and things they overheard made a difference. How they were talked to by university personnel and employers has been used to motivate them to succeed. Some of the influencers may have never known the impact their words had on the lives of these women, but they resonate still today. This is a lesson to all who encounter nontraditional African American women. Treating people with respect and dignity has long-term effects. It is socially inept to do otherwise.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of nontraditional African American women college students were the focus of this research study. Even though they faced adversity these students are still enrolled in college. Being passed over for jobs made participants

determined to do whatever it took to acquire the careers they wanted and not to be passed over again. Likewise after a disappointing performance with the first degree a participant later used that to formulate a plan for it not to happen during subsequent degrees.

Garmenzy's resilience theory informed us that we must be resilient to achieve our goals in life. Moving past circumstances that often stop others in their tracks unable to recover from adversity. In his resilience theory, he found that individual, family and other supports work to encourage recovery and maintenance of desired outcomes (Shean, 2015), a point reiterated by Morales (2010) on how protective factors mitigate risk in academics. Middleton et al., (2023) added literature recognizing that strong support networks are known to nurture positively impact self-esteem in African American women. Those social networks include family, friends, and churches. Not only did these participants foster their resilience but some participants even mentioned the desire to help others when their academic pursuits are complete fostering social change. These participants eagerly shared their stories in hopes that they may help another person to achieve their academic and personal goals. This study highlights the multifaceted nature of nontraditional African American women students and underscores the importance of holistic support systems in facilitating their academic success.

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