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First-Generation Black and Latinx Students and Their Perceived Level of Postsecondary Education Preparedness

Shawanna Burton
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Shawanna M. Burton

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Review Committee
Dr. Jasmine Willis, Committee Chairperson, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty
Dr. Ariel Harrison, Committee Member, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2025

Abstract

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MA, Walden University, 2019

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

First-generation Black and Latinx students report challenges of belonging and preparation in the transition to college. Limited research on these experiences hinders counselors' support for these students. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore first-generation Black and Latinx college students' meaning of their high school experiences. A hermeneutic phenomenology conceptual framework was used to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, focusing on how guidance from high school counselors influenced their sense of belonging, persistence, and degree attainment in postsecondary education. Data were collected from nine participants through semistructured interviews and analyzed using a six-phase thematic analysis. The selection criteria included first-generation Black and Latinx college students who sought postsecondary preparation from their high school counselor. The findings revealed four central themes: the influence of high school counselors' roles and responsibilities, the challenges of inadequate preparation for the transition to college, the significance of belonging, and the unique impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx student. The findings from this study can lead to positive social change by bridging the gap between students, school counselors, and counselor educators by raising awareness of systemic challenges that continue to widen the education attainment gap among first-generation Black and Latinx college students. The results of this study suggest that school counselors serving this population must recognize the connection between students' sense of belonging, inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college, and persistence in postsecondary education.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Fredrick; my father, Randolph; my mother, Wanda; my pops, Anthony; my brothers, Larikus and Randrekus; my two beautiful daughters, Chassidy and Maliyah; and to the rest of my family and friends. You have all supported me throughout my academic journey, and I am forever grateful. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The United States has become increasingly diverse. By 2060, non-Hispanic Whites are expected to become a minority, representing only 44% of the population (Vespa et al., 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2019), the same trend has also been reflected in current college enrollment demographics. Attending college has not always been a future goal for some students; however, for many first-generation Black and Latinx college students, the social and economic mobility that a college education can offer has been a core motivation for pursuing further education beyond the high school level (Brown et al., 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment in postsecondary education and degree attainment rates had been steadily increasing among all racial groups (Giani et al., 2022). Since then, more than 40% of first-generation Black and Latinx college students have either dropped out or failed to complete their degree within the first 4–6 years of college matriculation (Museus, 2021).

High school counselors have been in the best position to prepare first-generation Black and Latinx college students for postsecondary educational attainment (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019). In 2022, the belief that a high school counselor could potentially boost college success and degree attainment drew national attention and inspired policy changes through former first lady Michelle Obama's Reach Higher Initiative (RHI; Griffin & Birkenstock, 2022). Under the RHI, high school counselors were encouraged to help increase access to postsecondary education

opportunities (Mulhern, 2020). Despite national educational initiatives, first-generation Black and Latinx college students continue to remain marginalized in postsecondary education attainment (Page et al., 2019).

According to Choi (2019), first-generation Black and Latinx college students reported their early departure from their degree programs due to a lack of belonging and not feeling adequately prepared for the academic transition from high school to college. While most research on postsecondary education has focused on access to education, no existing research has explored the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students and their academic preparation in this manner. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their sense of belonging, and how their high school counseling experience prepared them for persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment. The goal of this study was to understand how first-generation Black and Latinx college students attribute meaning to their high school counseling experiences, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of the high school counselor's role in preparing first-generation Black and Latinx college students for postsecondary education, persistence, and degree attainment (Kivunja, 2023).

In this chapter, I discuss background information on the perceptions of first-generation Black and Latinx college students regarding postsecondary education preparation and the role of high school counselors. Next, I state the problem, the purpose of the study, the primary research question, and the conceptual framework. Additionally,

I discuss the nature of the study, providing definitions, assumptions, and the scope of the delimitation. Finally, I explore the limitations and significance of the study.

Background

Although postsecondary education has been a leading pathway to social mobility and economic stability, for many first-generation Black and Latinx college students, the college experience has not been without various challenges (Cuellar, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted nearly every aspect of the social and economic lives of individuals, families, and communities (Denise & Anderson, 2024). During the pandemic, enrollment in postsecondary education declined. According to Liu (2021), nearly three in four U.S. households planning postsecondary education experienced some pandemic-related disruption. Beyond enrollment, first-generation Black and Latinx college students either switched to a different program or discontinued their postsecondary education plans altogether (Liu, 2021).

According to Shapiro et al. (2018), 40% of first-generation Black and Latinx college students who matriculate in college will not stay. Several students have left college early because of a lack of belonging and feeling inadequately prepared for the transition from high school to college (Choi, 2019). According to a recent report from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation (2024), more than 40% of first-generation Black and Latinx college students considered leaving their postsecondary education program because they did not feel adequately prepared and lacked knowledge about the college process. Although high school counselors have traditionally provided academic guidance and assisted students with postsecondary education planning, the revamping of the school

counselor roles has limited the amount of time they have with students. School counselors have a significant impact on the postsecondary preparation of first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Fitzpatrick, 2020).

Furthermore, high school counselors have not always lived up to their potential as social/emotional and academic counselors (Blake, 2020). Research suggests that high school counselors often experience role ambiguity due to a lack of a clear job description, which causes them to struggle with balancing their roles as counselors and educators (Blake, 2020). Although high school counselors have historically provided one-on-one postsecondary education guidance, their role ambiguity has led to an overwhelming number of non-counseling duties, reducing the time they spend with students (Blake, 2020). Nonetheless, this has been especially crucial for first-generation Black and Latinx college students, who often rely on their high school counselors for postsecondary education guidance. According to Poynton et al. (2021), one third of first-generation Black and Latinx college students are first-year students. Research has shown that first-generation Black and Latinx college students tend to face increased psychosocial difficulties, which have the potential to negatively impact their overall academic performance (Poynton et al., 2021).

Several researchers have explored postsecondary enrollment and access. However, given the negative impact on postsecondary education attainment since the pandemic, a study examining the effect of postsecondary education preparation was significant in describing how first-generation Black and Latinx college students interpret

their high school counseling experiences regarding postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment.

Problem Statement

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been a steady increase in college matriculation among first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Giani et al., 2022). Since then, first-generation Black and Latinx college students have not earned their postsecondary degree at the same rate as their White non-minoritized peers (Museus, 2021). Across the literature, first-generation Black and Latinx college students consistently report a lack of belonging and inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college as core challenges in both applying for and persisting in postsecondary education (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Further research is needed to understand the impact of persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment.

As the United States continues to become increasingly diverse, counselor educators, stakeholders, and policymakers need to recognize how inadequate preparation for the academic transition from high school to college contributes to the widening of the postsecondary education attainment gap. The findings of this study may provide high school counselors and educators with a strategy that would help lessen the postsecondary education attainment gap between first-generation Black and Latinx college students and their White non-marginalized peers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their sense of

belonging, and how their high school counseling experience has prepared them for persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment. A phenomenological approach aligns best with understanding the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Peoples, 2021). According to the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies, high school counselors must ensure that all students are equally prepared for postsecondary education opportunities (ASCA, 2019). Furthermore, given that first-generation Black and Latinx college students report a lack of belonging and feeling inadequately prepared for the transition from high school to college, understanding directly from the voices of first-generation Black and Latinx college students would be significant in finding ways to work with first-generation Black and Latinx college students regarding postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment.

Research Questions

The main research question is, What are the lived experiences of postsecondary education preparation for first-generation Black and Latinx college students seeking postsecondary academic guidance from their high school counselor? The second research question is, How have high school counseling experiences shaped your meaning regarding a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their sense of

belonging, and how their high school counseling experience has prepared them for persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment. Qualitative research draws on a range of epistemological and ontological traditions to examine a diverse array of phenomena (Kohlert et al., 2019). I chose a hermeneutic approach because I wanted to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students rather than describe them (Fuster, 2019). According to Bakanay et al. (2016), the term *hermeneutics* derives from the Greek language, meaning "to understand" or "to interpret." Heidegger (1971) argued that individuals cannot suspend their judgment. Instead, people create their sense of reality because no objective reality exists. According to Heidegger (1971), because we are always present and engaged in our world, we cannot detach from our own experiences. Specifically, first-generation Black and Latinx college students have reported a lack of belonging and felt inadequately prepared for the transition from high school to college and lacked knowledge about the college process, which has continued to produce significant gaps in postsecondary education attainment (Jha & Stearns, 2018). *Dasein* is another term Heidegger introduced to describe a dynamic way of existing in the world through an ontological lens. Hence, this continuous engagement of interpretation can lead to the concept of the hermeneutic circle. I chose this conceptual framework to explain further and address the challenges that first-generation Black and Latinx college students face regarding persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative study helped to understand critical, rich, and ambivalent experiences in the communication landscape of a research study (Nolan-Cody et al., 2024). Qualitative studies describe and make meaning through the use of interviews and data analysis (Patton, 2015). I employed a thematic analysis approach to investigate how first-generation Black and Latinx college students perceive their high school counseling experiences in terms of sense of belonging, persistence in postsecondary education, and degree attainment. A thematic analysis aligns with this study in that it allowed me to assess themes and different ideas or actions that came to the forefront of the students' experience and how that might have changed or evolved (Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

Definitions

The definitions of terminology I used throughout this study include the following:

Attainment: Attainment refers to the successful completion of a postsecondary degree program. Attainment is measured by graduation rates to demonstrate the educational outcomes of students who participate in postsecondary education (Dorime-Williams & Choi, 2023).

College matriculation: As Lynch (2022) wrote, to matriculate is to enter a school's degree program with the aim of completing the academic requirements to be conferred with an earned [educational credential] such as a college degree. The term "matriculate" is often confused with the term "graduate" as some believe both mean the same (Lynch, 2022). However, they are different and do not hold the same connotation. The concept of postsecondary education refers to any education beyond high school.

First-generation college student or first-generation student: The concept of first-generation college student or first-generation student refers to any student that is the first in their families to attend college or a university. Redford and Hoyer (2017) defined first-generation college students as students whose parents did not attend college or earn a college degree. There are many unique and diverse characteristics that fit under the umbrella of a first-generation student; therefore, it can be quite difficult to provide one single definition for this term (Deng, 2022). According to Nunez and Carroll (1998) first-generation students can also be identified as those whose parents have not completed formal education beyond a high school diploma. Nevertheless, there are many ways to operate this concept. Therefore, both terms were used interchangeably throughout this study to avoid generalizing and comparing information about this group (Peralta & Klonowski, 2017).

Hispanic Serving Institutions: Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) is a term in the literature referring to an institution with more than 50% Hispanic demographics. Additionally, HSI can be classified as a minority serving institutions based on their overall student demographics (Schnell, 2021).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities: HBCUs is a term in the literature referring to an institution with most students who identify as students of color.

Postsecondary education: The concept of postsecondary education refers to any education beyond high school. The term postsecondary education in other disciplines is also known as tertiary education (Vlasova, 2022); however, postsecondary education was the primary term used.

Predominantly White Universities: Predominantly White University or PWI is a term in the literature referring to an institution with mostly White students. Most colleges and universities across the nation are considered predominantly White institutions because their student demographics are more than 50% White (Schnell, 2021).

Assumptions

In hermeneutic research, there is a fundamental assumption that multiple perspectives or interpretations exist (Van Manen, 2014). In this study, my initial assumption was that participants had spoken with their high school counselor about postsecondary education preparation at least once during their high school tenure. A reason for this assumption is that participants may forget about specific experiences with their counselor throughout their tenure. Another assumption is that participants shared their genuine and authentic feelings. However, it was always a possibility that participants would provide answers to the research questions that sounded more positive than accurately described the reality of their experiences. A third assumption was that the participants did not feel like they belonged to a group or community on campus. Finally, participants had some understanding of the postsecondary education process.

Scope and Delimitations

The participants in this study met five essential criteria. First, all participants identified as Black or Latinx. The second criterion was that all participants had to have attended or currently attend a college or university. The third criterion was that each participant identified as a first-generation college student. The fourth criterion was that all participants have collaborated with their high school counselor at any level of their

high school tenure, specifically in preparation for postsecondary education. The fifth criterion was that all participants were 18 years or older. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), transferability refers to the extent to which data from qualitative studies can be applied to other populations and contexts while still maintaining their context-specific nature. The results from my research had limited transferability to different populations and educational levels; however, the descriptions from the in-depth interviews provided a richer understanding of the lived high school counseling experience for first-generation Black and Latinx college students and how their understanding had shaped a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment.

Limitations

I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study. However, this method had several limitations, including limited generalizability, data collection challenges, researcher bias, participant limitations, difficulties with validity/reliability, and complexity in analysis (Patton, 2015). Trust was crucial in establishing the credibility and reliability of qualitative findings (Ahmed, 2024). One limitation is generalizability. I used purposeful sampling to carefully select participants who identified as Black or Latinx, attended or have attended a college or university, identified as a first-generation college student, had collaborated with their high school counselor at any level of their high school tenure, and were age 18 years or older. Data were collected until no further themes were discovered and saturation was achieved (Patton, 2015). This study focused on the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students. As a Black woman who matriculated through various levels of postsecondary education, there was

potential for researcher bias. I used reflective journaling to regularly document my thoughts, feelings, and insights about the research process and described the potential contextual intersecting relationships between myself and the participants (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). In addition to reflective journaling, I used member checking to allow participants to review their transcripts and provide any emerging feedback regarding the findings (Burkholder et al., 2020). Lastly, when discussing my findings, I addressed the study's limitations regarding generalizability, highlighted the specific context and population studied, and suggested potential areas for further research to explore the phenomenon in different settings (Ahmed, 2024).

Significance

Limited research has focused on how high school counseling experiences have prepared first-generation Black and Latinx college students for the academic transition from high school to college. This study was significant in that it could help fill the gap in understanding the importance of the high school counselor's role in preparing first-generation Black and Latinx college students for a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment. Research has shown that since the COVID-19 pandemic, college matriculation and postsecondary education attainment for first-generation Black and Latinx college students have declined, even furthering the education attainment gap (Giani et al., 2022). Therefore, the results of this study contribute to the literature by addressing the challenges of a lack of belonging, persistence in postsecondary education, and degree attainment among first-generation Black and Latinx college students.

As the United States continues to become increasingly diverse, counselor educators, stakeholders, and policymakers must understand how the inadequate preparation for the academic transition from high school to college widens the postsecondary education attainment gap. The findings of this study provided high school counselors and educators with a strategy that would help lessen the postsecondary education attainment gap between first-generation Black and Latinx college students and their White, non-marginalized peers.

Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted the critical need to complete this study, based on the current gaps in the literature regarding a lack of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment, as expressed through the direct voices of first-generation Black and Latinx college students. I discussed the foundation of the study, the problem, the significance of the study, the research questions, and the conceptual framework. Lastly, I discussed the assumptions of the current study, its scope, and limitations. Next, in Chapter 2, I will provide an extensive literature review following the research method outlined in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I described the influence of high school counselors on the sense of belonging, persistence in postsecondary education, and degree attainment among first-generation Black and Latinx college students. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been a steady increase in college matriculation among first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Giani et al., 2022). Since then, first-generation Black and Latinx college students have not earned their postsecondary degree at the same rate as their White non-minoritized peers (Museus, 2021). Across the literature, first-generation Black and Latinx college students consistently report a lack of belonging and inadequate preparation for transitioning from high school to college as a primary challenge in pursuing and persisting in postsecondary education attainment (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Further research was needed to understand the impact of persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment.

As the United States continues to become increasingly diverse, counselor educators, stakeholders, and policymakers need to understand how inadequate preparation for the academic transition from high school to college contributes to the widening of the postsecondary education attainment gap. The findings of this study may provide high school counselors and educators with a strategy that would help lessen the postsecondary education attainment gap between first-generation Black and Latinx college students and their White, non-marginalized peers. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-

generation Black and Latinx college students, their sense of belonging, and how their high school counseling experience prepared them for persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment. A phenomenological approach aligned best with understanding the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Peoples, 2021).

According to the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies, high school counselors shall maintain the mindset that all students should be equally prepared for postsecondary education opportunities (ASCA, 2019). Furthermore, given that first-generation Black and Latinx college students lacked a sense of belonging, felt inadequately prepared for the transition from high school to college, and lacked knowledge about the college process, understanding directly from the voices of first-generation Black and Latinx college students would be significant in finding ways to prepare better high school counselors to work with first-generation Black and Latinx students on preparing for postsecondary education attainment.

In this chapter, I will discuss the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, and literature review, and provide a summary of the key sections.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review involved a search for peer-reviewed articles from several databases published within the past 5 years. The search strategy included a Boolean search of EBCO, SAGE, SOCIndex, PsychINFO, Research in the Schools/MSERA, and *Journal of School Counseling*. In addition to the Boolean search, other relevant information was obtained from direct websites, including the ASCA, the U.S.

Department of Education, and the National Center for Education Statistics. The keywords used in my search included f*irst-generation Black and Latinx college students*, *high school counseling experiences*, *the role of high school counselors*, *post-secondary education*, *college matriculation*, *post-secondary education attainment*, and *post-secondary education preparedness*.

Conceptual Framework

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the use of phenomenology as a research method, particularly in educational research (Stolz, 2023). The research questions in this qualitative design aim to enable participants to share the meaning of their experiences, which can be best understood within the context of their real world. As Simon (2015) suggested, hermeneutics is a process and method that reveals what is usually hidden from human experience. Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on what it means to be and interact with others within their experiences. Although phenomenology was first conceptualized and theorized by Edmund Husserl, an Austrian German philosopher and mathematician, Martin Heidegger rejected those ideas. Husserl believed that the primacy of the natural sciences had become detached from the fabric and reality of human experience, and every theoretical and scientific practice grows out of or remains supported by the forgotten ground of our directly felt lived experience (Abram, 1997). In Husserl's view, a more secure founding of scientific knowledge starts with describing the objects of study as phenomena of consciousness (Suddick et al., 2020). He further believed meanings intuited through consciousness can

be described precisely with a phenomenological attitude and reduction (Suddick et al., 2020).

In contrast, Heidegger rejected Husserlian phenomenological ideals, arguing that they were descriptive and espoused the essential structures of consciousness (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). This hermeneutic phenomenological study examined the impact of the high school counseling experience on the preparation and attainment of postsecondary education for first-generation Black and Latinx college students. I used a phenomenological approach because it aligns best with understanding the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Peoples, 2021). My chosen approach includes a hermeneutic ontology focusing on Martin Heidegger's concepts of Dasein and the hermeneutic circle.

According to Heidegger (2003), human beings should be conceived as *Dasein*, a German word usually translated in English as "existence," but which also literally means "being there." For Heidegger, we are constantly engaged in our world, and it is impossible to understand our experiences if we are detached (Heidegger, 1962). Dasein expresses a dynamic of being in the world in which our existence can be characterized ontologically by existential structures or language (Wilson, 2014). Heidegger believed that language is important and that it speaks to us (Sass, 2021). However, in his book, Heidegger writes that language harbors an interrelatedness of understanding of Dasein; it hides a developed way of conceiving that implicitly includes the horizon of intersubjectivity (Heidegger, 1996). According to Dreyfus (1991), we are constantly engaged in our world, interpreting, coping with practicalities, and caring about things that

are specific to us or our experiences. Therefore, this ongoing engagement with interpretation and understanding leads to a conceptual framework that presents the two loops of the hermeneutic circle to interpret the lived experiences of high school counseling for Black and Latinx students in pursuit of postsecondary education and degree attainment. Efforts to define the term *lived experience* of Black and Latinx students, as specific to this research, are challenged by the paucity of clear definitions and the ambiguity of the meaning that the word "experience" holds in general (Gellweiler et al., 2018). The term "experience" corresponds to two distinct words in German: *Erfahrung*, which refers to gaining knowledge, and *Erlebnis*, which denotes learning the truth (Gadamer, 2004). Erlebnis comes from the verb "erleben," which means "to live to see" or "to be still alive when something happens" (Gellweiler et al., 2018). The prefix "er" is also significant because it means to be "from out of something according to its essential measure (Gellweiler et al., 2018). According to Heidegger, we have lost the link between "experience" and "life" through its translation from German to English (Heidegger, 2004). Hence, the hermeneutic circle introduced by Heidegger suggests an understanding of context in a circular movement that runs back and forth until that text is understood (Gellweiler et al., 2018). Therefore, the text in my study refers to how Black and Latinx students make meaning of their past experiences by collaborating with their high school counselor. As Gellweiler et al. (2018) wrote with regards to the transcript as the text, the need to understand what it was like for the student participants to engage in their high school counseling experience required me as the researcher to also enter and engage in the hermeneutic circle both in the text and during the research process to allow

for the richness of the text to be best understood. Given such inductive reasoning, data obtained from the study participants involved capturing data throughout their high school counseling experience and sharing the meanings produced from each participant's self-reflective interpretations (Gellweiler et al., 2018). Thus, interpretations of data corresponded with the entering and leaving of distinct phases or parts of the hermeneutic circle. Therefore, as the researcher, I must acknowledge that any discovery of meaning obtained through an infinitive process, as one's viewpoint on things can continuously form through new fusions of horizons, and decide when sufficient information has been generated to answer my research questions (Gellweiler et al., 2018).

Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenological studies have been employed to investigate the experiences of college students (Armino et al., 2024). Parker (2024) surveyed nine Black undergraduate college students majoring in music to gain insight into their lived experiences at a predominantly White music school. Additionally, Griffith et al. (2019) conducted a study to learn about the race-related stressors that may take a toll on Black college students at predominantly White Institutions.

Literature Review

First-Generation College Students in the United States

First-generation college students make up approximately one third of students enrolling in U.S. colleges and universities (Purdy, 2021). First-generation college students are undergraduates whose parents have not attained any postsecondary education, or students who are the first in their families to enroll in a college or university program (Raghavan et al., 2024). Most first-generation college students are

predominantly non-White and are from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds (Maglione et al., 2024). Over the past decade, research has shown that first-generation college students do not feel adequately prepared for the transition from high school to college which has caused significantly lower college graduation rate (Whitley et al., 2018). According to the Education Data Initiative (2022) report, first-generation college students had a 92.2% higher dropout rate. Since they cannot benefit from their parents' college-going experience, first-generation college students start off their college experience at a disadvantage and may have little to no knowledge about the college-going process (Raghavan et al., 2024). As a result, first-generation college students may attempt the college-going process alone or will depend on their high school counselors to help them navigate the college-going process. According to Brookover et al. (2021), first-generation college students are almost two and a half times more likely than non-first-generation college students to seek postsecondary guidance from their high school counselor. Brookover et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study to understand the perspectives and experiences of first-generation college-bound high school students. Researchers found that students successfully matriculated into college when there were collaborative partnerships between themselves, their families, school counselors, and their teachers (Brookover et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding first-generation college students' salient experiences in preparing for college is key for educators to engage in transformative college preparation efforts (Brookover et al., 2021).

First-Generation Black and Latinx Students in Postsecondary Education

First-generation college students comprise approximately one third of students enrolling in U.S. colleges and universities (Purdy, 2021). First-generation college students are undergraduates whose parents have not attained any postsecondary education or students who are the first in their families to enroll in a college or university program (Raghavan et al., 2024). Most first-generation college students are predominantly non-white and are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Maglione et al., 2024). Over the past decade, research has shown that first-generation college students felt a lack of belonging and did feel adequately prepared for the transition from high school to college, which has caused significantly lower college graduation rates (Whitley et al., 2018). According to the Education Data Initiative (2022) report, first-generation college students had a 92.2% higher dropout rate. Since they cannot benefit from their parents' college-going experience, first-generation college students start their college experience at a disadvantage. They may have little knowledge about college-going processes (Raghavan et al., 2024). As a result, first-generation college students may attempt the college-going process alone or depend on their high school counselors to help them navigate it. According to Brookover et al. (2021), first-generation college students are almost two and a half times more likely than non-first-generation college students to seek postsecondary guidance from their high school counselor. Brookover et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study to understand the perspectives and experiences of first-generation college-bound high school students. Researchers found that students successfully matriculated into college when there were collaborative partnerships

between themselves, their families, school counselors, and their teachers (Brookover et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding first-generation college students' salient experiences in college preparation is key for educators to engage in transformative college preparation efforts (Brookover et al., 2021).

Belonging in Postsecondary Education

The lack of belonging is another challenge that first-generation Black and Latinx students experience regarding not feeling adequately prepared for the academic transition from high school to college (Arday et al., 2022). In an academic context, belonging is a multidimensional construct that includes feeling personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by other students, staff, and school educators (Allen et al., 2021). Research has shown that academic, social/emotional, and financial challenges have negatively impacted their sense of belonging (Tucker et al., 2020). Hence, first-generation Black and Latinx students may not pick their first college, enroll part-time as non-traditional students, or take gap years before full-time enrollment (Anastal et al., 2018). Nevertheless, enrolling part-time or taking gap years increases the completion time; however, it also inhibits students' ability to make necessary personal connections on campus with peers from diverse backgrounds (Anastal et al., 2018).

Furthermore, once first-generation Black and Latinx students arrive on campus, they are ill-equipped to navigate the stigmas and dominant institutional culture successfully (Ricks & Warren, 2021). Raghavan et al. (2024) found that first-generation Black and Latinx students are not often oriented to the college culture, which many times reflects a predominantly White, Western, and individualistic experience. However, these

challenges are especially pronounced for first-generation Black and Latinx students who may face stigmas not experienced by their White, non-minoritized peers (Schelbe et al., 2019). For that reason, first-generation Black and Latinx students struggle with a sense of belonging, which can negatively impact their mental health, degree completion times, and postsecondary attainment (Bamberger & Smith, 2023).

Havlik et al. (2020) conducted an interpretive phenomenological study that examined the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students at a mid-sized, private, predominantly White institution. The study sought to understand students lived experiences and sense of belonging at that institution. The study revealed that first-generation Black and Latinx students felt "othered," which was described by the participants as a sense of possessing an outsider status, feeling of not belonging, being viewed as different or less than others, being misunderstood, excluded, or invalidated (Havlik et al., 2020). Participants also reported that when they arrived on campus, they realized their disadvantage in regard to resources necessary for success (Havlik et al., 2020). Academically, participants reported feeling unprepared to do well in their classes and struggled to fit in the classroom (Havlik et al., 2020). Last, the participants reported that their socioeconomic status also made them feel a sense of otherness or outsider status because of their lower socioeconomic status or poverty background (Havlik et al., 2020).

In addition to facing challenges with navigating the culture at PWIs, first-generation Black and Latinx students also faced criticism from their own culture with stereotypes such as acting White from their race. The "acting white" (AW) accusation is a specific type of cultural invalidation that challenges the perceived authenticity of people

of color who demonstrate nonstereotypical behaviors or display attributes that are believed to be prototypical of White Americans (Durkee et al., 2019; Ford-ham & Ogbu, 1986). Durkee et al. (2019) explored how AW may be understood across sociodemographic. First-generation Black and Latinx students reported their speech patterns as characteristics of AW more frequently than any other sociodemographic (Durkee et al., 2019). The term AW reinforces stereotypes about marginalized racial/ethnic groups. It normalizes "White" attributes, making it even more challenging for first-generation Black and Latinx students to see themselves as feeling adequately prepared for the academic transition from high school to college (Durkee et al., 2022). Durkee and Gomez (2022) conducted a longitudinal study that focused on the mental health implications of being accused of AW among first-generation Black and Latinx students. The study revealed that accusations of AW had a direct mental health implication, causing increased anxiety and depression during their first year of college (Durkee & Gomez, 2022).

In contrast to PWIs, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have played a sustained role in providing educational opportunities in the United States for those from historically marginalized communities (Williams et al., 2021). HBCUs have continued to offer and meet the educational needs of students from diverse racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds (Arroyo et al., 2017). Throughout segregation prior to the Civil Rights Act, most American institutions of higher education predominantly served White populations, never forwarding an opportunity for Black and Latinx students to attend because they were not as privileged. However, from a critical

lens, this prevailing practice of comparing HBCUs to PWIs implicitly frames HBCUs from a deficit perspective, creating narratives that "other" HBCUs and their students are different or abnormal compared to their white American counterparts (Dance et al., 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), in 2020, 101 HBCUs were located across 19 states, including the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Research has often highlighted how these institutions operate within conditions where financial and otherwise resources are limited (Johnson & Winfield, 2022). Historically, HBCUs are underfunded, which forces these institutions to rely on tuition dollars to cover operational costs. Students are forced to increase their student loan borrowing to pay tuition costs, such as private school and out-of-state tuition. Therefore, these conditions shaped experiences and outcomes among HBCU students in myriad ways, often captured through student retention and making it even more challenging to complete their degree programs (Johnson & Winfield, 2022). Johnson and Winfield (2022) explored how HBCU institutional policies and practices fostered success amongst marginalized students attending HBCUs under these conditions. Although some participants found attending an HBCU limited their affordability, diversity on campus, academic practices, and racial and intellectual identity cultivation concerns, some reported otherwise. Some viewed their institutions as stubborn in their conservative ways, and these values did not promote personal growth or change in the community (Johnson & Winfield, 2022).

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) have advanced postsecondary education opportunities for first-generation Black and Latinx students (Elfman, 2023). The number

of HSIs has tripled over the past 25 years (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023). HSIs make up 18% of all colleges and universities and enroll over two thirds of Hispanic students (HACU, 2023). However, degree attainment at HSIs continues to lag behind PWIs and HBCUs (Ching, 2022). A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need that can raise the chances of self-actualization and academic success in college (Donoghue et al., 2025). Donoghue et al. (2025) conducted a person-centered study to explore the heterogeneity in belonging in a large sample of undergraduate students enrolled at HSI. A multinominal analysis was used to determine if the participants experienced lower levels of belonging. The study aimed to identify standard belonging profiles among college students in a majority-minority HSI. According to Donoghue et al. (2025), the analysis showed that the cluster of students with the lowest levels of belonging was much lower on peer support than on faculty support and classroom comfort. The increased feelings of isolation further validate that having peer support across college and university campuses is crucial for improving a sense of belonging (Donoghue et al., 2025). For first-generation Black and Latinx students to feel adequately prepared for the transition from high school to college, it is important to understand how to cultivate the college-going experience that eliminates places where students feel isolated or underprepared (Deeb-Sossa et al., 2024).

The Role of the High School Counselor

In the 1950s, school counselors were considered pupil service providers, nurses, psychologists, and social workers. In 1952, the ASCA was formed to advance the standards for school counseling programs and provide training to establish ethical

behavior (Myrick, 1997). In the 1970s, the school counselor's role shifted from its roots in the guidance movement of the early 1900s to now providing social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary counseling to students throughout all levels of education (Blake, 2020).

The ASCA National Model outlines the school counselor's role in college and career readiness counseling and postsecondary planning through their professional and ethical standards (Novakovic et al., 2021). In its fourth edition, the national model outlines the counselor's role, including appropriate and inappropriate school-related duties (ASCA, 2019). According to Burnham et al. (2024), it is appropriate for school counselors to provide academic advising, interpret aptitude and achievement tests, provide short-term counseling, and use consultation and collaboration with school administrators and teachers. In contrast, it is inappropriate for school counselors to build the school's master schedule, coordinate testing services as a substitute, compute grade-point averages, write individual education plans, and enter data (ASCA, 2019). However, 25 years later, the school counselor's role has not yet been defined (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021).

For first-generation Black and Latinx college students, school counselors can play a key role in their postsecondary success (Villares & Brigman, 2019). While research has shown that high school counselors have long focused on preparing students for the transition from high school to college, there is still little exploration as to how those experiences are understood regarding postsecondary education preparation and degree attainment (Nice, 2023). St. Cyr et al. (2023) surveyed members of a prominent school

counseling organization to measure their perceived responsibility, self-efficacy, and performance related to increasing students' college knowledge. The study aimed to understand what level school counselors believe they bear the responsibility to increase students' college knowledge, how efficacious counselors feel in providing college knowledge to students, and what level counselors provide college knowledge (St. Cyr., 2023). The results showed discrepancies between the expectation as defined by the ASCA model and the view of the school counselor. Similarly, Blake (2020) found that high school counselors suffered from role ambiguity and role conflict due to a lack of a clear job description because of overwhelming amounts of noncounseling duties. Furthermore, high school counselors have been forced away from traditional guidance counseling roles, which now limits their time spent with students in postsecondary education preparation (Tang & Ng, 2019).

Research has shown that high school counselors can greatly influence first-generation Black and Latinx college students and their college preparation. Indeed, high school counselors have played a key role in educating first-generation Black and Latinx college students about the college process and supporting early access; however, researchers have found that this support alone has not always equated to degree attainment (Rohn, 2024). To no fault of their own, this has specifically been critical for first-generation Black and Latinx college students because there is often no family blueprint available. According to Sackett et al. (2018), first-generation Black and Latinx college students saw their high school counselor as being exclusively practical in helping them prepare for postsecondary education.

Despite having tremendous power to shape students' college-going thinking and preparation, school counselors' lack of support can determine whether many students matriculate to college and earn their postsecondary degree (Ballysingh et al., 2021). First-generation Black and Latinx college students have thrived where there were collaborative partnerships regarding college preparation (Brookover et al., 2021). Although prior research has highlighted the importance of school counselors working with first-generation Black and Latinx college students, there is little research on the student's perspective.

Summary and Conclusions

The social and economic benefits of earning a college degree have been extensively studied; however, because non-completion continues to be a persistent problem, more research is needed to understand the barriers that continue to impact college persistence and degree completion among first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Brown-McNair et al., 2019). The results of the studies mentioned were essential to my research. They revealed the challenges that first-generation Black and Latinx college students face in preparing for and attaining degrees in postsecondary education. This section addressed first-generation college students in the United States, specifically focusing on first-generation Black and Latinx students in postsecondary education, their sense of belonging in this context, and the role of the high school counselor. In the next chapter, I discuss my research method.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their sense of belonging, and how their high school counseling experience prepared them for persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment. First-generation Black and Latinx college students reported their early departure from their degree programs due to a lack of belonging and inadequate preparation for the academic transition from high school to college (Choi, 2019). While most research on postsecondary education focuses on access to education, no study has explored the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students and their academic preparation in this way.

Given the influence on early postsecondary education access and the support role that high school counselors can play in postsecondary education attainment, understanding how first-generation Black and Latinx college students understand those counseling experiences in support of postsecondary degree attainment can increase knowledge and understanding for the counselor's role and the importance of their role in preparing first-generation Black and Latinx college students for postsecondary education attainment. The purpose of Chapter 3 is to discuss the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and issues of trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

The primary research question is: What are the lived experiences of preparing for postsecondary education among first-generation Black and Latinx college students

seeking postsecondary academic guidance from their high school counselors? The second research question is: How have high school counseling experiences shaped your understanding of a sense of belonging, persistence in postsecondary education, and degree attainment? Qualitative research is an umbrella term for research approaches that seek to understand natural phenomena, such as human experiences (Ajjiawi, 2022). I examined the high school counseling experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students and the influence of these experiences on a sense of belonging, persistence in postsecondary education, and degree attainment. I chose a qualitative design over a quantitative one to gain a more profound and in-depth understanding of the lived counseling experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students and how they perceive those experiences in their preparation for and attainment of postsecondary education.

Furthermore, qualitative research allowed me to analyze themes and patterns (Patton, 2015). However, a thematic analysis aligned best with my study. It allowed me to identify and interpret data patterns and themes, which often led to new insights and understanding (Naeem et al., 2023). I employed a six-stage thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns and themes in the data, which led to new insights and understanding (Naeem et al., 2023).

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research is often a dynamic and multifaceted experience (Williams, 2024). Although, as the researcher, I got to immerse myself in the participants environment, capturing the essence of their lived experiences and perspectives, I still had

to balance my own preconceptions (Naeem et al., 2023). According to Burkholder et al. (2020), researcher biases can be inadvertently communicated through body language and voice tone, which could potentially lead to participants feeling judged or leading them to answer the interview questions to please the researcher. To control research bias, I used reflexivity. According to Burkholder et al. (2020), reflexivity is a trustworthy strategy that can be used in qualitative research to document researcher biases, the research process, and any adjustments made throughout the study. In addition to reflexivity, I used member checking to allow participants to review their transcripts and provide any emerging feedback regarding the findings (Burkholder et al., 2020). Last, I journaled my preconceptions, reflections, ideas, and biases before, during, and after data collection (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The participants who were eligible to participate in this study met the following criteria:

- identified as Black or Latinx
- attend or have attended a college or university
- identified as a first-generation college student
- had collaborated with their high school counselor at any level of their high school tenure specifically in preparation for postsecondary education
- 18 years of age or older

This study sought participants who identified as first-generation Black and Latinx college students, ideally eight to 10 in number. I posted a recruitment flyer on Walden's participant pool page, as well as on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants, employing snowball sampling and convenience sampling. Potential participants received a link to complete the informed consent form and demographic form (see Appendix A). Next, I used the interview guide to collect all data (see Appendix B). I used Zoom (https://www.zoom.com), a HIPAA-compliant audio-conferencing platform, to conduct the semistructured in-depth interviews, which lasted 45 to 90 minutes. My goal was to achieve saturation by gathering the richest information from my participants during data analysis and ensuring that no new codes or themes emerged (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Instrumentation

Instrumentation is critical in a qualitative study (Henline, 2024). However, in a qualitative methodology, the researcher is the primary instrument. However, it is common for researchers to use a combination of instrumentation (Peoples, 2021). For this study, I conducted 45- to 90-minute semistructured interviews using the Zoom audio conferencing platform. I used reflective journaling to document my thoughts, feelings, and insight throughout the research process and described the potential contextual intersecting relationships between myself and the participants (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). In addition to reflective journaling, I used member checking to allow participants to review their transcripts and provide any emerging feedback regarding the findings (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were recruited using various social media platforms, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. In addition to using social media, I recruited participants using the Walden University participant pool. I posted a recruitment flyer every other week for 6 weeks until I obtained eight to 10 participants. Once participants were identified, a secure link to the consent form was sent to them. After participants acknowledged and provided their consent, they were directed to complete the demographic form and schedule their interview time. All participants participated in a 45- to 90-minute interview via Zoom, which was audio-recorded for transcription purposes. I conducted interviews until the point of saturation was reached. All participants received a secure online link to the meeting room for each interview. At the end of the audio-recorded interviews, participants were provided with a copy of their transcripts to check for accuracy. The data were stored in a locked filing cabinet at my office and will be kept for 5 years.

Data Analysis Plan

According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), the interpretation of the data depends on the researcher's theoretical standpoint. Therefore, I needed to reflect upon my experience as a Black woman who has also navigated through all levels of the educational system. My personal history did not diminish the quality or significance of the analysis; however, explicitly stating and acknowledging my filters will make it easier for readers to contextualize the work. To analyze the themes and patterns in the data, I used Atlas.ti (https://atlasti.com) to conduct a six-stage thematic analysis (Naeem et al.,

2023). A thematic analysis includes six steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing it up (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). I used the six-stage theme analysis to decipher the qualitative data from participant interviews. First, I began narrowing down keywords and citations based on my initial review of the data, which involved transcribing the data and familiarizing myself with it (Naeem et al., 2023). Next, I looked for recurring patterns, terms, or visual elements and designated them as keywords (Naeem et al., 2023). The third step in a thematic analysis is generating themes. I used Atlas.ti coding software during this stage to code short phrases or words that capture the data's core message, significance, or theme (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). The fourth stage is reviewing themes. To offer insight into the research questions, I organized the codes into meaningful groups to identify any patterns or relationships found in the data (Naeem et al., 2023). The fifth step is to define and name themes. According to Naeem et al. (2023), I can identify social patterns that emerge from the data in this stage. The final stage in the thematic analysis is the write-up stage. During this stage, I culminated the analysis to discuss the findings, to discuss if the findings answered my research questions, and shared the contribution of knowledge (Naeem et al., 2023).

Issues of Trustworthiness

In the early years, qualitative researchers rejected the concept of validity. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not use instruments with established metrics about validity and reliability. Qualitative researchers settled on trustworthiness as a definition of criteria better suited to a naturalistic inquiry/constructivist paradigm

(Guba, 1981). Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study (Stenfors et al., 2020). To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the four standard criteria credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were discussed (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Credibility

According to Guba (1981), the credibility of the researcher allowed me to consider the complexities of the research and explain patterns or themes that were not easily discernible. Credibility was established through the use of purposeful sampling in participant selection. I recruited only first-generation Black and Latinx college students for this study, as the purpose was to explore how their lived experiences have shaped the meaning of educational persistence. The second credibility criterion was that the students were either enrolled in a postsecondary degree program or had already earned a credential. Another key element that adds credibility to research is data saturation. Data saturation is the conceptual yardstick for estimating and assessing qualitative sample sizes (Geuest et al., 2020). For this study, saturation was achieved during data analysis, as the semistructured interviews yielded little or no new, helpful information relevant to the study objectives.

Credibility, the accurate and truthful depiction of a participant's lived experience, can be achieved through prolonged engagement and persistent observation to gain an understanding of the phenomenon's context (Stenfors et al., 2020). Although I did not have prolonged engagement with the participants, they represented different marginalized ethnic groups. Therefore, data triangulation was achieved by cross-checking the data and

interpretations of each participant and their lived experience. Additionally, member checks were conducted by continually verifying data and interpretations with the participants from whom the data were solicited (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Transferability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), transferability refers to how the study can be applied or is transferable to broader contexts while maintaining context-specific richness. Transferability was enhanced by using a purposive homogenous sampling method and providing thick descriptions and robust data with a wide range of information through the detailed and accurate description of the participants (Stenfors et al., 2020). This was achieved by continuous recruitment and data collection until the data are saturated, complete, and replicated (Stenfors et al., 2020).

As the literature suggests, there is ample research that supports Black and Latinx students gaining access to college. However, the college education attainment gap continues to widen, showing a lack of representation amongst Black and Latinx students. As a member of this marginalized group and having matriculated throughout the education system, this mediated the study. Additionally, I wanted to immerse myself in the phenomenon to gain a comprehensive understanding of it, fully comprehend the participants' experiences, and thoroughly describe them in hopes of improving educational attainment among Black and Latinx students.

Dependability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), dependability refers to the stability of data. The dependability of the research was achieved through the use of a semistructured

interview process. The interview was conducted via Zoom and audio recorded. All participants were asked all interview questions. I was intentional in the way that I asked each question to ensure that each participant understood the questions being asked. Additionally, I probed and asked appropriate follow-up questions as prompted. To ensure that dependability was met, the interview questions followed the six categorical type questions:

1. Experience and Behavior Questions- These questions focused on what the students have done, will do, or are currently doing to prepare for or persist throughout their postsecondary education program.
2. Opinion and Values Questions-These questions explored what the students thinks and believes about educational preparedness and persistence and the value she or he places on it.
3. Feelings Questions- These questions explored what the students feel and their emotional experiences (rather than or in relation to what they think) about educational preparedness and persistence.
4. Knowledge Questions- These questions sought facts and information that the students might already know about educational preparedness and persistence.
5. Sensory Questions- These questions proved what the students had experienced at the sensory levels as in what they see, hear, touch, taste, or smell.
6. Background/Demographic Questions- These questions focused on the student's social location, identities, and positionalities as they conceptualize and described them (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Dependability was further ensured through the transcription of the interviews. All interviews were transcribed through the Zoom platform. Throughout the data analysis phase, every attempt was made to document all aspects of the analysis (Stenfors et al., 2020). This involved categorizing and ordering the information in a way that made sense of the data and enabled the drafting of a final report that was accurate and truthful (Stenfors et al., 2020). Furthermore, I examined the transcribed data and made every effort to identify themes and descriptors as they emerged.

Confirmability

Confirmability was achieved through the use of reflective journaling and audit trails. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process to record notes and document any daily introspections that might be beneficial and pertinent to the study (Stenfors et al., 2020). The audit trail will consist of the actual interviews and my reflective journal. To achieve confirmability, the audit trail was used to examine the process by which the data was collected and analyzed (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Ethical Procedures

Educational qualitative research can easily become both a vehicle and a target for ethical, political, and methodological attack (Karagiozis, 2018). Social and political issues may arise. Karagiozis (2018) argued that the degree to which these issues permeate the research process is not always understood, especially by those directly involved. Research compliance was achieved by adhering to the ethical standards as defined by the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) and the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. As the primary researcher, I

aligned the study with the core principle of not harm (Patton, 2015). Prior to the start of the study, I provided participants with an informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire.

Data were kept confidential by assigning each participant a unique random number. The data were further kept confidential on a password-protected hard drive. Additional artifacts will be kept confidential for 5 years in a locked filing cabinet that I will have exclusive access to. Beneficence was maintained by minimizing the risk to the participants through purposeful sampling and informed consent (Karagiozis, 2018). According to Karagiozis (2018), justice was achieved through the chosen sampling procedures, participants' self-identification as Black or Latinx, and their current or past enrollment in a postsecondary education program with an earned credential. As the primary researcher, I refrained from selecting participants with whom I knowingly had any current or previous relationship. One potential ethical concern related to recruitment was that IRB approval was sought during the spring and summer quarters, which could potentially overlap with spring and summer breaks. I addressed this concern by using Zoom, allowing participants to engage in the study from any location.

Finally, to ensure a safe and trusting environment, I protected the participants by maintaining healthy professional boundaries. I utilized reflective journaling throughout the research process and maintained awareness of the potential intrusiveness into the participants' lives (Karagiozis, 2018). Additionally, I maintained the sensitivity of the data and maintained confidentiality by not sharing information among the participants or disclosing any identifying information in this study (Karagiozis, 2018).

Summary

This study was significant because the findings helped explain the voices of Black and Latinx students' experiences how school counseling programs could be revamped better to prepare them for education persistence and postsecondary degree attainment. The goal of this chapter was to outline the research methods that were used to answer the two primary research questions. Next, Chapter 4 will present the data analysis, and Chapter 5 will further discuss the research findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their lack of belonging, and how the high school counseling experience has prepared them for postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment. A phenomenological approach aligns best with understanding the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Peoples, 2021). According to the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies, high school counselors must maintain that all students should be equally prepared for postsecondary education opportunities (ASCA, 2019). Furthermore, given that first-generation Black and Latinx college students report a lack of belonging and feeling inadequately prepared for the transition from high school to college, having understood directly from the voices of first-generation Black and Latinx college students would be significant in finding ways to work with first-generation Black and Latinx college students regarding postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment. The main research question was, What are the lived experiences of postsecondary education preparation for first-generation Black and Latinx college students seeking postsecondary academic guidance from their high school counselor? The second research question was, How have high school counseling experiences shaped your meaning regarding a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment? In Chapter 4, I will discuss the setting, demographics, of participants, data collection methods, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

I recruited a total of nine participants that met the following criteria:

- identified as Black or Latinx
- currently attending or have attended a college or university
- identified as a first-generation college student
- collaborated with their high school counselor at any level of their high school tenure specifically in preparation for postsecondary education
- currently 18 years of age or older

The recruitment flyer was posted on Walden's participant pool page, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram until saturation was met. I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants using snowballing and convenience sampling. Potential participants were directed to a link to complete the informed consent form and demographic form (see Appendix A). I contacted all eligible participants via email and scheduled their audio-recorded interviews. I used Zoom, a HIPAA-compliant audioconferencing platform to conduct each semistructured interview that lasted 20 to 35 minutes until saturation was met.

Demographics

The study sought eight to 10 research participants who identified as Black or Latinx, current or previous enrollment at a college or university, identified as a first-generation college student, have collaborated with their high school counselor at any level of their high school tenure specifically in preparation for postsecondary education, and was 18 years of age or older. Participants who completed the demographic survey but

did not meet the research criterion were excluded. Four participants were excluded from the results as two had not collaborated with their high school counselor, one never scheduled their interview, and the last participant withdrew. The participant pool concluded with six women and three men ranging in age from 18 to 59 years of age and 1 to 4 years of postsecondary education (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Race/ethnicity	Age range	Gender	Level of postsecondary education
P1	Black	30–39	Female	Third-year college student/junior class
P2	Black	50–59	Female	Graduated/obtained a postsecondary degree
P3	Hispanic	40–49	Male	Graduated/obtained a postsecondary degree
P4	Hispanic	30–39	Female	Graduated/obtained a postsecondary degree
P5	Black/White	18–29	Male	Second-year college student/sophomore class
P6	Black	18–29	Female	Third-year college student/junior class
P7	Black/White	30–39	Male	Third-year college student/junior class
P8	Black	18–29	Female	Graduated/obtained a postsecondary degree
P9	Black	18–29	Female	Fourth-year college student/senior class

Data Collection

I was granted IRB approval for this study on April 21, 2025, with the Walden University approval number 04-21-25-0667882. The initial request for participation was posted on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn on April 21, 2025. Requests for participation were posted on Walden's University Participant Pool on April 23, 2025. A

total of nine semistructured interviews were completed through the data collection process. Interested participants were invited to complete the online consent form. Then, if the participants agreed to the study's criteria, they were directed to the online Google Docs demographic screener (see Appendix A). Participants were contacted via email confirming their participation qualifications and were offered to schedule their Zoom interview. All data were collected and audio-recorded one-on-one using a secured individual Zoom meeting link. A total of nine interviews were conducted until saturation was met. Each interview was conducted via Zoom platform and lasted 20–45 minutes. All interviews were transcribed using the Zoom audio recording and transcription function. All transcriptions were checked for accuracy and were stored on an encrypted flash drive only accessible by me. Before each interview, I bracketed by reflecting upon my values and assumptions regarding first-generation Black and Latinx college students, the high school counseling experience, and postsecondary education attainment based on my experience as a high school career coach and graduate college student. However, to incorporate reflectivity into the research, mindfulness journaling was used to recognize my subjectivity rather than excluding it (Crawford et al., 2019). In addition to mindfulness journaling, a review of the interview questions, the purpose of the study, and an interview guide addressed these values and assumptions to ground me in the study. Field notes were utilized throughout the interview process. After IRB approval was granted, I received an influx of interested participants who met the study's criteria but did not respond to the initial email to schedule the Zoom call. Four participants were excluded from the results as two had not collaborated with their high school counselor,

one never scheduled their interview, and the last participant withdrew. Saturation was met after the ninth interview. After each interview was completed, it was automatically transcribed using the HIPAA-compliant Zoom transcription function. To enhance trustworthiness and check for accuracy, I read all the transcripts, edited them for accuracy, and compared them to field notes. All field notes were locked in the personal office solely used by me.

Data Analysis

The first step of the data analysis involves the journaling process, in which I examined my biases and experiences regarding access to postsecondary education and compared them to the underrepresentation of first-generation Black and Latinx students and their degree attainment. This step made me more aware of my biases before reviewing the interview transcripts. I read all transcripts and utilized member checking to check for accuracy. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. I provided transcript summaries during the member-checking process to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected their perspectives and experiences. During the member-checking process, participants were allowed to provide any additional information or change transcript responses (Peoples, 2020). All participants approved of their transcripts for accuracy.

According to Ahmed et al. (2025), a thematic analysis is one of the most widely utilized methods for analyzing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within datasets. To analyze the data, I used Clarke and Braun's six-phase thematic data analysis

process. The six-phase analysis comprised the following steps: familiarization with the data, generation of codes, combining codes into themes, reviewing the themes, determining the significance of the themes, and reporting the findings (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Each phase contributed systematically to the development of meaningful insights, allowing me to remain actively engaged with the data throughout the process (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Familiarization With the Data

The first phase in the thematic analysis is to become familiar with the data (Clarke and Braun, 2013). I became familiar with the data by reading the initial transcripts and checking for accuracy. To remain ethical and ensure privacy, each participant was assigned a random participant identification number. Next, I added additional notes to the transcript that were shared by the participants after the recording stopped. Lastly, I removed all identifiable information from the original transcripts.

Generation of Codes

The second phase in the thematic analysis is the generation of codes. I used multiple-colored highlighters to examine the transcripts further, marking keywords, phrases, sentences, and direct quotes to identify keywords. According to Naeem et al. (2025), keywords are rich words or phrases selected based on realness, richness, repetition, repartee, and regal. Lastly, I used the coding software Atlas.ti to organize the selected keywords and citations.

Combining Codes Into Themes

The third phase in a thematic analysis is combining codes into themes. Keywords play an essential role at this stage as they form the analysis's backbone and help convert raw data into insightful, manageable units (Naeem et al., 2023). After identifying and highlighting keywords, phrases, sentences, and direct quotes from the transcripts, I checked for patterns based on their shared characteristics to emerge codes (Naeem et al., 2023). I selected codes to reflect the meaning of the grouped quotations and keywords that addressed the two research questions (Naeem et al., 2025). Finally, I organized the codes into categories based on their shared characteristics (Naeem et al., 2023).

Reviewing the Themes

The fourth phase in a thematic analysis is reviewing theme development. During this stage, codes are organized into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, offering further insight into the research questions (Naeem et al., 2023). In this phase, I used an inductive approach to identify four themes: the impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor, the impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student.

Determining the Significance of the Themes

The fifth phase in the thematic analysis is determining significance of themes. During this stage, the themes are conceptualized coherently to help potential readers understand, categorize, and communicate the data in a meaningful representation (Naeem et al., 2025). The themes were placed in categories that addressed the What are the lived

experiences of postsecondary education preparation for first-generation Black and Latinx college students seeking postsecondary academic guidance from their high school counselor? The second research question was, How have high school counseling experiences shaped your meaning regarding a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment.

Reporting of the Findings

The sixth phase in the thematic analysis is reporting of findings. During this stage, the data was synthesized and put into a conceptual model to identify the relationships between the concepts across all participants. I wrote the data analysis during this stage and discussed the relationship between the themes and the two research questions, What are the lived experiences of postsecondary education preparation for first-generation Black and Latinx college students seeking postsecondary academic guidance from their high school counselor? The second research question was, How have high school counseling experiences shaped your meaning regarding a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment.

Table 2

Themes Across Participants

Participant ID	Themes	Participant quotes
P1	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"It is something that I can get that no one can take from me;" "It was terrifying."
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"Provide guidance;" "A brief relationship."
	The Importance of Belonging	"We were the minority." "I was an athlete." "I felt I had to be cautious about things that I would say and do."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"I was kicked out.;" "It took me 8 years to go back."
P2	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"Education was something that no one could ever take away from you;" "It leveled the playing field.;" "I wanted to make a better life for myself."
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"It was a great relationship in the beginning." "She did a lot of check-ins with me because she wanted me to be well rounded and a well-versed student." "She was laser focused on where she wanted me to go rather than seeking opportunities from other places." "She let her counseling role become too personal."
	The Importance of Belonging	"Color was always prevalent." "It was an anomaly." "It was a culture shock;" "I became more sound and comfortable with my Blackness."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"I had a rigorous portfolio"
P3	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"A better income and job opportunities;" "To share my story with other kids in my community."
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"I had a different counselor all 4 years of high school."
	The Importance of Belonging	"I experienced several micro-aggressions."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"I failed." "I was not prepared;" "I took remedial classes" "I struggled academically and financially."
P4	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"My parents;" "it was a privilege."
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"She was supportive;" "she told me about the pros and cons of attending college."
	The Importance of Belonging	"It felt like the majority race was favored more." "Being bilingual helped;"
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"I graduated, but I am not using my degree."
P5	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"I was immensely proud." "It was mind blowing." "It wasn't easy."

Participant ID	Themes	Participant quotes
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"A role model who provides academic advisement and guidance." "It provided me with a solid foundation"
	The Importance of Belonging	"I dealt with discrimination."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"It provided a solid foundation"
P6	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"I wanted to do something different." "I wanted to be the first to do it." "It was different for sure." "I was an athlete"
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"To lead you and provide emotional support." "She helped with the admissions and transfer process."
	The Importance of Belonging	"It is harder for people to accept you." "I was the only Black person at times in my friend groups." "I felt like I had to watch the way I would act."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"It was extremely helpful."
P7	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"I wanted to do something different in family." "It was scary."
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"Not supportive;" "I felt like they were going down a check box." "I went to college blindly."
	The Importance of Belonging	"It was extremely difficult because of my environment." "I did not belong there."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"I dropped out early"
P8	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"It was empowering;" "a humbling experience" "I am from a small town where only a few have made it out."
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"I felt misguided."
	The Importance of Belonging	"It was bittersweet, because it felt lonely at the top." "I often felt alienated." "It was definitely a culture shock."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"It wasn't easy." "I had to figure things out on my own."
P9	The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student	"I wanted to be a role model for the younger generations"
	The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor	"My counselor knew my family, so he had higher standards for me."
	The Importance of Belonging	"It felt like a family-oriented environment."
	The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition from High School to College	"I experienced many trials and tribulations, but it was worth it." "It helped build my confidence and got me out of my shell."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

According to Guba (1981), credibility allows the researcher to consider the complexity of the research and explain patterns and themes that may not be easily understood from the data. Purposeful sampling was used to select the study participants that meet the research criterion. To ensure the research findings were credible, I used member checking to follow up with each participant throughout the data collection and analysis process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I verified the accuracy of the data, findings, and interpretations with the participants through email and submission of their interview transcripts (Peoples, 2020). The sample size was concluded with nine participants once saturation was met, and no new themes were identified (Geuest et al., 2020).

Transferability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), transferability is when research can be applied or transferable to broader contexts while maintaining its rich data. Although ample research supports first-generation Black and Latinx college students gaining college access, research has been limited in discussing the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students. However, data was collected until saturation was met with nine participants.

The study participants lived in Georgia and Texas; therefore, their experiences may not translate to first-generation Black and Latinx college students in other geographical regions. Furthermore, the experiences shared by the participants may not resonate with other first-generation college students with similar lived experiences.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability and trustworthiness of the data throughout the data collection process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I conducted audio-recorded semistructured interviews using a secure, HIPAA-complaint Zoom meeting link. I used an 11-question interview guide and asked each participant the questions in order. Once the data was collected and transcribed, each participant was sent a copy of their interview transcript for member checking and to ensure accuracy. I provided updates and communicated with the committee chair throughout the interview and data collection process.

Confirmability

Confirmability was achieved through a combination of audit trails and reflective journaling. A reflective journal was used throughout the research process to keep notes and document the research data analysis method (Stenfors et al., 2020). The audit trail was documented through the data collection process and was used to examine all interpretations of the data further (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Results

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their lack of belonging, and how the high school counseling experiences have prepared them for postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment. As a result of the study, an inductive approach was used to explore four themes. The themes that emerged included the impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor, the impact of inadequate

preparation for the transition from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student. All four themes were repeated throughout each interview and addressed both research questions, what are the lived experiences of postsecondary education preparation for first-generation Black and Latinx college students seeking postsecondary academic guidance from their high school counselor and how have high school counseling experiences shaped your meaning regarding a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment.

The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor

The impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor was the first theme that emerged. The role of the high school counselor has shifted from the guidance movement to having less one-on-one time with students. Many students explained that the HS counselor's primary role was to provide academic guidance, emotional-social support, and assist with resources to prepare students for college. However, some shared that they had limited interactions and had a different high school counselor due to burnout and high turnover. Five of the nine participants reported that their high school counseling experiences were not positive. One participant shared that they felt a negative relationship with their high school counselor and noted that their counselor seemed disengaged. Another participant shared that his counselor "focused more on their outside business than getting to know students." Participant 7 shared that they also felt "misguided" and unprepared for postsecondary education. Some participants also described their relationship with their high school counselor as

inconsistent, and they lacked postsecondary guidance due to high turnover, which ultimately prevented them from forming meaningful connections. However, Participant 9 shared that although their relationship with their counselor was strict, it was positive for their development as a more confident and well-rounded student. Five out of nine participants shared that their counselors were inadequate and lacked clear communication regarding specific college requirements and the admissions process. One participant explained that counselors' roles are to "help break down the college process and simplify things." Some participants felt that counselors should not only assist students in preparing for college but also provide support in navigating personal issues. Participant 3 expressed that counselors have a demanding role, managing many students while guiding them through the college process, providing resources, and ensuring they are on the right path.

The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition From High School to College

The impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college was the second theme to emerge. Although high school counselors have previously played a crucial role in preparing first-generation Black and Latinx college students for the transition from high school to college, this was not the case for all participants. All participants described role ambiguity due to the lack of preparation from high school to college. Many shared that they did not feel prepared for the transition from high school to college, including not feeling prepared academically or for the social-emotional aspects of postsecondary education. Four of the nine participants who reported having a positive high school counseling experience also felt that their high school

counseling experiences did not adequately prepare them for postsecondary education and degree attainment. Participant 1 expressed that her high school counselor discussed the steps to attend college, but not how to navigate potential academic challenges. She experienced a personal setback that resulted in an 8-year hiatus from her postsecondary studies. Participant 8 interpreted her experience at an HBCU as a transformative period, during which she felt a sense of belonging and empowerment among her peers due to having similar backgrounds and academic goals. Three out of nine participants who attended PWIs found the racial makeup of their college more challenging, noting that acceptance seemed more difficult due to differing backgrounds. Participants shared that they encountered microaggressions and felt "out of place." Furthermore, participants explained that the struggle to find one's identity, feeling disconnected from specific groups, and encountering both support and microaggressions led to premature dropping out.

The Importance of Belonging

The importance of belonging was the third theme to emerge. Many students had similar thoughts about the microaggressions and differences they felt as minority students in a predominantly white academic environment and other culturally serving institutions. Some participants reported that they did not feel socially connected, despite attending an HBCU or HSI. All nine participants explained struggling to find their identity, feeling disconnected from specific groups, and encountering both support and microaggressions. Participant 8 interpreted her experience at an HBCU as a transformative period, during which she felt a sense of belonging and empowerment among her peers due to having

similar backgrounds and academic goals. Participant 3 shared that once he got to community college and the university, he did not feel a sense of belonging. He reported that coming from the Latinx community, he dealt with several microaggressions because he was too Americanized."

Three out of nine participants who attended PWIs found the racial makeup of their college more challenging, noting that acceptance seemed more difficult due to differing backgrounds. Participant 1 felt that even though she was popular because she was an athlete, she was "still Black" and felt like she needed to "walk on eggshells," and "watch what she would say and do because if she made one bad move she would be kicked out."

The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student

The impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student was the last theme to emerge. All participants discussed what it meant to them to be a first-generation Black or Latinx college student. Participants shared similar meanings but had different motivations for pursuing postsecondary education and achieving a degree, including improving their socioeconomic status, securing better job opportunities, making their parents or family proud, and serving as a role model for others in their family or community. Participant 1 shared her experience coming from a smaller rural town. She shared that her interest in athletics drove her motivation for attending college. She felt that athletics would help improve her socioeconomic status. Participant 2 shared that her mom and grandparents had always emphasized the importance of education, which shaped her perspective on pursuing a college education. She shared that she felt that her

"education was something no one could ever take away from her." She knew attending college would give her access to more opportunities. However, she explained that growing up in the north, access to education was different. She felt like, because she was one of the few Black kids attending a prestigious performing arts school in Manhattan, "she was the token student that would make the stats look good." Participant 3 explained that his family never discussed college attendance with him. He stated that his parents both had a limited grade school education and that "they valued hard work and a great work ethic" over the value of education. He explained that he had watched his parents work extremely hard to provide for their family, so he wanted to be in a position where he had more opportunities and would not have to work as hard. Participant 3 shared that he always wanted to be a teacher so that he could "use his experience and better prepare other children within his community for postsecondary education."

Summary

In Chapter 4, I discussed participants' demographics, data collection methods, data analysis, and study findings. During the data analysis, four themes emerged: the impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor, the impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the interpretations of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their lack of belonging, and how the high school counseling experience has prepared them for postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment. A hermeneutic phenomenology was used to understand better the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students and how they attributed meaning to their high school counseling experiences in preparing them for postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment (Kivunja, 2023). Four themes emerged: the impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor, the impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student. Two research questions guided this study: (a) What are the lived experiences of postsecondary education preparation for first-generation Black and Latinx college students seeking postsecondary academic guidance from their high school counselor? and (b) How have high school counseling experiences shaped your meaning regarding a sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment? In this chapter, I discuss the research findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications for positive social change and conclude with an overall study summary.

Interpretation of the Findings

This hermeneutic phenomenological study was developed to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their lack of belonging,

and how the high school counseling experience has prepared them for postsecondary education persistence and degree attainment. Research has discussed the role of the high school counselor, highlighting the lack of consistency and its negative impact on first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Participants confirmed that a lack of belonging and inadequate preparation for transitioning from high school to college were core challenges in applying for and persisting in postsecondary education attainment (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Research has discussed the role of the high school counselor in preparing first-generation Black and Latinx college students for postsecondary education, but there remains a lack of understanding addressing the need for postsecondary education persistence and procedures for providing social-emotional support for first-generation Black and Latinx college students (Nice, 2023). The literature review did highlight concerns about the influence of high school counselors on first-generation Black and Latinx college student's sense of belonging, postsecondary education persistence, and degree attainment, and lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, this study explored the detailed experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students and their relationship with the high school counselor in preparing them for the transition from high school to college (Nice, 2023). The following four themes emerged: the impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor, the impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student.

The Impact of the Roles and Responsibilities of the High School Counselor

Participants described the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor and discussed the impact that it had on them regarding their transition from high school to college. High School counselors have been leaders in promoting college and career readiness for all students (American Counseling Association, 2019). In addition, part of their job role has also been to ensure that all students are academically prepared to pursue the postsecondary education option of their choice, and that students possess the knowledge and skills to apply for and be admitted into postsecondary education (Novakovic, 2021). According to the ASCA (2022), the role of school counselor is to provide a school counseling program that helps all students enhance their academic development to achieve and exceed high academic standards while recognizing that growth in all three domains of academic, career, and social/emotional development is necessary for students to be successful now and later in life. Research suggests that first-generation college students are two and a half times more likely than non-first-generation college students to seek postsecondary education guidance from their high school counselor. The results of this study confirmed this to be true. All participants sought postsecondary education guidance from their high school counselor at least once during their high school tenure. Participant 2 described the high school counseling role as essential. She stated that a "high school counselor is supposed to guide you." Participant 5 explained that the high school counselor's role is to help students and "provide college guidance." Participant 2 shared that her high school counselor discussed with her the specific high school courses she needed to enroll in to be on the college-going track. She

also informed her of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) dates and had frequent check-ins to keep her aware of upcoming college application deadlines. Participants 1 and 6 explained that their high school counselors informed them of the college costs. They both shared that their school counselors assisted them with accessing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and provided guidance on applying for scholarships. The findings of this study extend knowledge regarding the impact of the roles and responsibilities of a school counselor in preparing first-generation Black and Latinx college students for the transition from high school to college by informing them of the college-going process.

The Impact of Inadequate Preparation for the Transition From High School to College

First-generation Black and Latinx college students have not earned their postsecondary degree at the same rate as their White non-minoritized peers (Museus, 2021). Across the literature, the inadequate preparation for both academic and social-emotional aspects of the transition from high school to college has contributed to a decline in first-generation Black and Latinx college students earning their degree within the first 4–6 years of matriculation (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). According to ASCA (2022), part of the high school counselor's role is to prepare students for college access by fostering family and community-based partnerships that focus on knowledge sharing and creating opportunities for college access. However, only one participant mentioned that their counselor had informed them about other programs that fostered relationships, providing them with early access to postsecondary education opportunities. In this study,

participants discussed the impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college. Many shared that they did not feel academically or socially prepared for postsecondary education. However, they denied that this had an impact on their decision not to pursue or earn a postsecondary degree. Most participants had personal aspirations to attend college because they wanted to make a better life for themselves. Participant 8 described growing up in a small town. She shared that jobs were limited to hard labor, so she knew she needed to attend college to have more job opportunities. Participant 7 shared that he did not have the best relationship with his counselor. He did not feel prepared for the transition from high school to college, but he knew he wanted to overcome the stigma in his family. Therefore, he continued to pursue earning his degree despite experiencing several academic and financial setbacks. The results did not confirm that feeling unprepared for the transition from high school to college led to participants not finishing or earning their postsecondary credential within the first 4–6 years of matriculation (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020).

The Importance of Belonging

According to Cimen (2025), the concept of belonging has been a topic of discussion in education for years. Most researchers associate the sense of belonging in school with how students perceive themselves, particularly in terms of their acceptance, respect, and inclusion in school processes and activities (Cimen, 2025). Research suggests that a lack of belonging has been a challenge for first-generation Black and Latinx college students, who do not feel adequately prepared for the transition from high school to college (Arday et al., 2022). Although it is not solely their role, school

counselors are in a position to shape an ethical, equitable, and inclusive school environment (ASCA, 2019). Participants did not describe their sense of belonging in high school as being fostered by their school counselor. Many participants shared that they felt isolated as minority students.. Participant 6 shared that she was always the only Black student in almost all her classes. She shared that she often felt like she had to "explain the Black perspective."

Participant 2 attended an HBCU and shared that throughout her life, she had always been a minority because few Black students attended the same school. She explained that "she felt like an anomaly when she attended college.' It felt like a culture shock because she had not been around so many students, teachers, or administrators who were Black. She said her college experience made her "more sound and comfortable with my Blackness." Participant 3 attended an HSI. He shared that his college culture was diverse, but "very cliquish" with different groups. He reported that his peers often viewed him as "too Americanized. The findings of this study disconfirm one assumption: despite attending a HSI, HBCU, or PWI, students still experienced microaggressions and felt a sense of disconnection and lack of belonging, regardless of their academic setting.

The Impact of Being a First-Generation Black or Latinx College Student

Participants described their experiences as first-generation Black or Latinx college students. According to Purdy (2021), first-generation college students make up a third of students enrolled in postsecondary education. Most are predominantly non-white and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Maglione et al., 2024). Furthermore, first-generation Black and Latinx college students have often experienced salient

experiences that have impacted their preparation for the transition from high school to college. Past research suggests that first-generation Black and Latinx college students are more likely to successfully matriculate into college when there is a collaborative partnership among themselves, their families, school counselors, and teachers (Brookover et al., 2021).

Participant 7 described his experiences as a Black first-generation college student as being extremely difficult. He shared that he often had to figure things out on his own because he felt no one else around him had the answers. Participant 7 felt isolated by both his family and peers. Participant 8 also described her experience as alienating. She shared that being a first-generation Black college student was "bittersweet" because others would be proud of her. However, they could not relate to or understand some of the challenges she might have faced as the only Black student in a predominantly White class. Given that participants described their lived experiences regarding the impact of a lack of preparation and feeling inadequately prepared for the transition from high school to college, the results of this study can further inform and provide strategy for school counselors and educators ways to address policies, practices and guidelines related to the inequalities experienced by first-generation Black and Latinx college students (ASCA, 2021).

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students. One limitation was researcher bias. As a Black woman who matriculated through various levels of postsecondary education, there was potential for

researcher bias. I used reflective journaling to regularly document my thoughts, feelings, and insights about the research process and described the potential contextual intersecting relationships between myself and the participants (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). In addition to reflective journaling, I used member checking to allow participants to review their transcripts and provide any emerging feedback regarding the findings (Burkholder et al., 2020).

A second limitation was participant selection. Part of the study requirements was that participants had collaborated with their high school counselor in preparation for postsecondary education at any level of their high school tenure. Some volunteers reported that they had met with their school counselor for other reasons but did not work with them on postsecondary education preparation, failing to meet the study's criteria.

A third limitation is that the study had limited generalizability. The data only included nine participants: one Latinx male, one Latinx female, two Black males, and five Black female volunteers. The findings were also limited by geographic location. The study only included participants from Texas and Georgia who volunteered, thereby excluding participants from other US regions and diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, this also caused concern regarding the transferability.

However, prior to recruiting more Latinx and male participants, the data reached saturation. Including both more female and male Latinx and Black male participants would have increased the diversity and transferability of the study. Additionally, opening the study to include all first-generation college students would have also increased the diversity and transferability of this study.

Recommendations

For this research, I conducted a hermeneutic phenomenological study, which had several limitations, including limited generalizability, challenges in data collection, researcher bias, and participant limitations (Patton, 2015). According to Ahmed (2024), trust is crucial in establishing the credibility and reliability of qualitative research. The strength of this study lies in the ability to collect rich data, as opposed to being limited to predefined questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A weakness of this study is that the findings are limited, as they only reflect the experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students from Texas and Georgia; therefore, the results are not generalizable to a larger population (Ahmed, 2024). It would be beneficial to collect data from participants across different ethnicities and different geographical locations to enhance the richness of the findings of this study.

Participants shared their brief interactions with their counselors and felt that they did not receive adequate preparation for the transition from high school to college. A finding that was also discovered was that even though some participants attended HBCUs and HSIs, they still felt a lack of belonging and reported experiencing microaggressions, felt a sense of disconnection and lack of belonging, regardless of their academic setting. Further phenomenological research on a sense of disconnection would also be beneficial in exploring the lived experiences of all students, regardless of their ethnicity, first-generation status, or the institution they predominantly attend.

The findings suggest that feeling unprepared for the transition from high school to college led to participants not finishing or earning their postsecondary credentials within

the first 4–6 years of matriculation. Further research on college retention will help inform school counseling programs by potentially addressing some of the early challenges that may impact this transition (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020).

Although his study yielded results regarding preparation, it did not provide evidence regarding the relationship between the preparation they received and whether it led them to earn their actual degree credentials. These findings are important to consider, as they may serve as a starting point for further exploring postsecondary retention and degree attainment among first-generation Black or Latinx college students who received postsecondary preparation from their school counselor.

Some volunteers reported that they had met with their school counselor for other reasons but did not work with them on postsecondary education preparation, failing to meet the study criteria. Further research could explore the student and school counselor relationship in a way that explores the social-emotional guidance students may have received and how those lived experiences impacted their perception of postsecondary preparation.

Lastly, this study also gained awareness of interactions with the school counselor. All participants sought postsecondary education guidance from their high school counselor at least once during their high school tenure. One aspect that was not explored in the findings was the lived experience of school counselors working with first-generation Black and Latinx college students. It would be beneficial to collect data from school counselors to explore their lived experiences in preparing marginalized students for postsecondary education guidance.

Implications

This dissertation study highlights several challenges that school counselors face in preparing first-generation Black and Latinx college students for the transition from high school to college. I sought to address the gap in the literature regarding the experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students and how they attributed meaning to their high school counseling experiences. Through investigating this topic, I aimed to raise awareness by discussing the impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor, the impact of inadequate preparation from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student, to increase understanding of the social-emotional implications of this experience on students pursuing postsecondary education. Following the completion of this study, implications for social change, as well as methodological and practical applications, were identified.

According to Raghavan et al. (2024), first-generation college students are those who are first-time students whose parents have not attained any postsecondary education and are the first in their families to enroll in a college or university program. Similar to the participants in this study, first-generation college students are often predominantly non-white and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Maglione et al., 2024). Research has shown that since these students are the first in their families to attend college, they may attempt the college-going process alone or depend heavily on their school counselors to help them navigate the transition (Brookover et al., 2021).

Although school counselors have been in the best position to prepare first-generation Black and Latinx college students for the transition from high school to college, first-generation Black and Latinx college students continue to remain marginalized in postsecondary education attainment (Page et al., 2019). This research is significant in that most studies have focused on gaining access to education; however, no prior research has explored the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students regarding their postsecondary education preparation in this manner.

Participants in this study shared experiences in which they had worked with their school counselors; yet they still felt a sense of inadequate preparation for their transition from high school to college. The findings of this study implied that the school counselor relationship was important, albeit brief. They did not provide students with an opportunity to build rapport with their counselor. Participants felt that the lack of belonging and inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college were challenges in applying for and persisting in postsecondary education attainment (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). One participant described her relationship with her school counselor as transitional.

Another implication is that school counselors begin working with college-bound students in their first year, thereby developing a post-graduation plan during the year they enroll at their school. This plan would be part of their student record, should that student change schools during their high school tenure. The post-graduation plan would also include next steps and suggestions that students and counselors can reference to help better prepare them for the transition from high school to college.

A hermeneutic phenomenological study was used to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students, their sense of belonging, and how their high school counseling experience prepared them for educational persistence in postsecondary education and degree attainment. According to Kohlert et al. (2019), qualitative research draws on a range of epistemological and ontological traditions to examine a diverse array of phenomena. The primary goal of the study was to understand how Black and Latinx students attribute meaning to their school counseling experience, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of the school counselor's role (Kivunja, 2023). According to Heidegger (1962), humans are constantly engaged in our world, and it is impossible to understand our experience if we are detached from it. I chose a hermeneutic approach because I wanted to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Black and Latinx college students rather than describe them (Fuster, 2019). For future studies, a transcendental phenomenological method could be employed to interpret the school counseling experience and its broader context, potentially explaining universal challenges that impact postsecondary preparation and degree attainment.

As stated in the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies, high school counselors must ensure that all students are equally prepared for postsecondary education opportunities (ASCA, 2019). Given that past research has also discussed the challenges of academic preparedness, understanding directly from the voices of first-generation Black and Latinx college students was significant, as it gave a voice. The findings from this study can lead to positive social change by raising

awareness of systemic challenges that continue to widen the education attainment gap among first-generation Black and Latinx college students, enabling them to earn their degree credentials at the same rate as their white, non-marginalized peers. Furthermore, this study can lead to positive social change, bridging the gap between students, school counselors, and counselor educators to identify and address the inadequacies regarding the lack of academic preparedness.

This study highlights several challenges that school counselors and counselor educators encounter in terms of their roles and responsibilities. School counselors and counselor educators are in a position to shape an ethical, equitable, and inclusive school environment (ASCA, 2019). In the study, four themes emerged: the impact of the roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor, the impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the impact of being a first-generation Black or Latinx college student. A possible approach to helping school counselors and counselor educators' roles and responsibilities, prioritizing their roles and responsibilities, and ensuring they are aligned with the ASCA national model. In addition, these findings may inform school counselors and counselor educators in implementing new policies to adjust their future work in how they work with students from marginalized communities. Lastly, these findings would also help support counselor educators in seeking more training on understanding the challenges that lead to early departure from postsecondary education of first-generation Black and Latinx college students (ASCA, 2022).

Conclusion

According to the ASCA, high school counselors must maintain that all students are equally prepared for postsecondary education opportunities (ASCA, 2019). Furthermore, high school counselors have a professional standard to ensure they are equipped to establish, maintain, and provide a comprehensive school counseling program that addresses the achievement, career planning, and social/emotional development of all students (ASCA, 2020). This study highlighted the impact of the roles and responsibilities of high school counselors, the impact of inadequate preparation for the transition from high school to college, the importance of belonging, and the challenges faced by first-generation Black or Latinx college students. The results of this study were obtained through rich, detailed descriptions of nine first-generation Black and Latinx college students. The findings contribute to the current literature and raise awareness about the role of school counselors in supporting first-generation Black and Latinx college students during the transition from high school to college, as well as their persistence in education and degree attainment.

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Appendix A: Demographic Form

1. What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)
    a. White
    b. Black or African American
    c. American Indian or Alaskan
    d. Asian Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
    e. Hispanic
    f. Other (please specify) _____
2. What is your age range?
    a. 18-29
    b. 30-39
    c. 40-49
    d. 50-59
    e. 60 and over
3. What is your gender?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Other (please specify) _____
4. Are you the first person in your immediate family to enroll in a post-secondary education program?
    a. Yes
    b. No
5. While in high school did you seek post-secondary education guidance or preparation from a high school counselor?
    a. Yes
    b. No
6. What best describes your current or previous level of post-secondary education?
    a. First-year college student/Freshmen Class
    b. Second-year college student/Sophomore Class
    c. Third-year college student/Junior Class
    d. Fourth-year college student/Senior Class
    e. Fifth-year college student/Graduate Level
    f. Graduated/Obtained a Post-Secondary Degree

Please email completed forms to Shawanna.burton@waldenu.edu

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. How would you define a first-generation college student?
2. Describe your motivation for becoming the first person in your immediate family to attend college.
3. Describe what it means to be a Black or Latinx college student.
4. Describe what it means to be a first-generation Black or Latinx college student.
5. How has your racial or ethnic identity impacted on your college experiences?
6. How does the racial or ethnic make-up of your college compare to your high school?
7. How did your racial or ethnic identity impact on your high school experiences?
8. Based on your understanding, what are the roles and responsibilities of a high school counselor?
9. Describe your relationship with your high school counselor (s).
10. Describe your high school counselor's role in preparing you for post-secondary education.
11. Now that you have post-secondary experiences, what are some things that you wish your school counselor would have done to prepare you for college?
12.