ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE

Dorothy M. Pearce-Brady

The Graduate School

Morehead State University

April 15, 2019

UNDERSTANDING THE PERSPECTIVES OF FIRST-YEAR AFRICAN
AMERICAN STUDENTS AND THE IMPACT OF A TRIO LIVING
LEARNING COMMUNITY AT A HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE
AND UNIVERSITY

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Abstract of Capstone

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
College of Education
At Morehead State University

By

Dorothy M. Pearce-Brady

Greensboro, North Carolina

Committee Chair: Fujuan Tan, Associate Professor

Morehead, Kentucky

April 15, 2019

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The use of Living Learning Communities (LLCs) is imperative for students'

success as they continue to develop skills to create various networks, build a sense of

belonging, and individualize their learning experiences. The concept of LLCs links

multiple learning opportunities—whether through courses, co-curricular activities,

special topics, interactions and conversations with faculty and peers—helping

students integrate and obtain a deeper understanding of their knowledge (Inkelas &

Weisman, 2003). This qualitative research study captured the personal narrative of 10

participants' perspectives of a TRIO residential LLC as they transitioned from high

school to college, as well as, the impact of the LLC in their personal lives. These

first-generation, minority students attended a historically black college and university

(HBCU). Student participants rekindled their past experiences and offered

suggestions for improvement for future participants in the LLC. The students were

pre-selected based on the economic and social conditions qualifications of the federal

TRIO program.

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Candidate Signature

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Date

UNDERSTANDING THE PERSPECTIVES OF FIRST-YEAR AFRICAN
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By

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DEDICATION

       This capstone is dedicated to my parents, husband, son, grandparents, tribe, brother, nieces, nephews, and extended family. Without your encouragement, this journey would not be possible. To my guardian angels, I have sustained because of the strength you instilled in me. To Quinn A.S. Gibson, may your super-powers continue to shine through the world. To my 4-H members, never give up on your dreams because you are the master of your destiny. To the 2002-2006 NCAT TRIO program staff, this journey was granted because of your support and mentorship. To the study participants, your experiences are going to change the trajectory of other first-generation students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Be on your guard; stand firm in faith; be courageous; be strong."- 1 Corinthians 16:13.

Mom and Dad, thank you for believing in me. Your selfless love and motivation have been endless. I am internally grateful to have you two. Daddy continue to watch over me. I miss you immensely, and I hope you are smiling from heaven.

To my husband and son, your patience and understanding have been out of this world. Your support means more to me than you will ever know. Carter, mommy loves you and thank you for being my inspiration when the possible seemed impossible. To my family, thank you for your support and continuous prayers. To my number four and eight, thank you ladies for being my safety net and I love you both. To my sister-friends, the accountability, support, and encouragement has kept me grounded. Thank you for making sure I stayed the course.

To Dr. Tan, Dr. Privott, and Dr. Cherry, thank you for the support, encouraging words, and patience. To Dr. Samuel, thank you for the encouragement and mentorship. To Dr. Curry, thank you for the encouragement.

To Better Off Dead (BOD), thank you all for the words of encouragement over the past few years. To Ryan, Staci, Jeff, Heather, and Rob thank you for walking alongside of me, encouraging me, listening to me, and helping me during all my craziness.

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Preamble

During high school, the message communicated the most was if a person wanted a well-paying job and to achieve the "American Dream," college was the answer. This message was emphasized by the school districts implementation of "career" tracks.

Some of my classmates had to make difficult decisions in their senior year of high school, with some having little to no guidance in preparation for life after high school. For me, my decision to attend a higher education institution came easily because of my accessibility and participation in the Upward Bound program. I felt more than confident in my ability to pursue a degree because of my Upward Bound experience from freshman to senior year and the college readiness preparation offered by the program.

Upward Bound is one of eight TRIO programs offered by a local four-year institution in my city. It was the most competitive college preparatory programs and I was selected take part in the summer and fall session from 2002 until 2006. I found value in the program because it catered to students like me: The program recruited minority students who were first generation and from a low socioeconomic status. Additionally, students taking part in the program received more help from counselors about making decisions about life post–high school.

While enrolled in the Upward Bound program, student participants like me received tuition aid, college application waivers, campus tours, mentors, college days, and scholarships. Many opportunities not offered by traditional high schools in my

district. I did not take lightly the financial support to apply to college from the aid of

the Upward Bound program. In my experience, the program covered five college

application fees and provided a stipend throughout the summer and fall. Since the

program supplied waivers with college application fees, a financial burden was lifted

from my family.

      I received acceptance letters from five of the colleges and universities I

applied too. My grades, extracurricular activities, and volunteer hours were high;

however, my ACT/SAT scores suffered. Although, I was a phenomenal student my

test scores made the admission process a challenge. To offer a second chance at being

admitted, the residential LLCs were offered to students that missed the university's

ACT or SAT test score requirements.

      One of the institutions on top of my list offered contingent enrollment with a

possibility to take part in a "specialized program" known as a residential Living

Learning Community (LLC) to gain full admittance. As a first-generation college

student, I was unclear about why I should attend an LLC as a choice for full

admittance to a 4-year university. I was offered two different LLC programs: one

from a predominantly white institution (PWI) and the other from a historically Black

college and university (HBCU). Both schools were top on my list to attend.

      The LLC at the PWI differed from one at the HBCU. For example, the

stipulations the PWI placed on potential students during their admittance process

made the process more difficult. I had a 3.2 grade point average (GPA), but my

SAT/ACT scores did not meet the university standards of 1700 and 4 on the writing

part; however, I met and surpassed qualifications for the other areas. The PWI wanted attendance during the entire summer and family visitation depended upon my GPA and participation in the summer courses. From a personal standpoint, the rigorous requirements were demanding, especially for a first-generation student with parents experiencing health problems and the institution relatively larger university. I chose not to attend the PWI because of the limited visitation with family, the fear of not being able to adapt to the large university environment, and the financial obligations required to attend.

The HBCU's Living Learning program allowed me to take part during the fall semester of my freshman year without restrictions compared to the expectations of the PWI. By comparing the dynamics of the universities, I chose admittance at the HBCU. I enrolled in the LLC based on the premise of the added help I would receive from the university, staff, and faculty, as well as the flexibility to travel in case of a family emergency.

Upon entering the LLC and trying to create a network with my peers, I realized many of the student participants had already established their network system and knew the faculty and staff because of their attendance during the summer. I felt lost trying to navigate my transitional experiences because of the delay of not attending the program during the summer and the lack of programmatic attention offered during the fall.

Reflecting, the major benefit I recalled about the program was my cohort living in a newly renovated dormitory found in the center of campus. The central

location of the dormitory gave students better accessibility to classroom buildings, first-year experience classes, library, administration building, and career services; all areas that were important to our development.

I concluded that I had no idea about the significant benefits of the program, nor did I receive any other help per the acceptance guidelines explained to me. The director discussed the added assistance offered from the program; however, the extra help did not materialize. For example, meetings with the LLC counselors were infrequent. We did not receive the one-on-one aid nor professional development from faculty, the staff did not incorporate self-help seminars, and we did not receive additional help with class registration after the initial process. Moreover, the programs administration lacked relying information about the campus and lacked assessing benefits of the residential LLC from the participants.

According to Wawrzynski and Anger (2010), LLCs are often touted as an innovative approach to reinvigorating undergraduate education by offering more frequent informal interaction between faculty members and students (p. 201). Earlier researchers highlighted the experiences of students attending PWIs; however, the literature lacks the experiences of students who attended minority-serving institutions such as HBCUs. With the combination of my experience and the increased student enrollment for colleges, it made me wonder: (a) What are the perceptions of students who are part of an LLC? and (b) Did the LLC impact the students' transition from high school to college? My LLC experience left many questions unanswered.

Understanding the perception of first-generation, minority, low-income students and conducting a historical study will guide the LLC and student support services departments in their programmatic efforts in the future. Additionally, the study will help administrative staff create effective assessments to evaluate the implementation of the program to increase involvement in the future. This study provided LLC students at an HBCU a platform to openly express their experiences and perspectives about their time participating in the LLC program. With the growing use of LLCs specifically at HBCUs, hence the development of this capstone.

Background

Experts often criticize undergraduate education at American universities for its lack of integrated and focused student learning environments. To combat this, higher learning institutions created learning communities to improve the educational endeavors of their undergraduate students (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) as well as other minority serving institutions have been known to supply educational opportunities and develop esteemed character to minority young men and women. HBCUs provide holistic learning for students as a collective combination of information and experiences learned from within and outside of the classroom.

Since Congress opened access in the 1960s to most institutions, African Americans have pursued higher education, but campus climate and traditional education pedagogy have failed to provide inclusive environments that traditionally

marginalized students need to flourish (Dahlvig, 2010, p. 369). According to research

conducted by Beasley, Chapmen-Hillard, and McClain (2016) scholars have

highlighted the deleterious impact of black students attending PWIs; emphasizing the

academic identity outcomes that are influenced by individuals, intrapersonal and

interpersonal and institutional factors, and the academic identity of Black students is

not often explored in connection with the contextual and environmental variables (p.

12).

  Historically Black Colleges and Universities are educational options for

minority students to experience a unique cultural environment that is packed into a

small-college experience; and allow those that may have been affected by inadequate

high school preparation challenges to overcome and allow them to be nourished with

the ability to flourish into a young professional (Lomax, 2006, p. 8). HBCUs allow

minority students to obtain fair education, especially for students that are faced with

limited choices or financial strains.

  Historically Black Colleges and University have exceeded the expectations of

their original purpose of only appeasing African Americans and not failing by

providing over 150 years of access to higher education and producing a large majority

of African American professionals and leaders in both the African American

community and the U.S.A. (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013, p. 145). The

cycle of the socioeconomic and racial injustices that students are experiencing in their

everyday lives are stipulations used to characterize African Americans from

generation to generation. To help African American students develop a unique

mechanism for adjustment and to increase their chances of persistence specifically at
an HBCU; living-learning communities have become a resource for students by
supplying support to ensure their academic success.

 According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators &
the American College Personnel Association (NASPA/ACPA), *Learning
Reconsidered* (the present defined term of LLCs) is defined as a comprehensive,
holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student
development, processes that have often been considered separate and even
independent of each other (2004). Learning Reconsidered is a model that emphasizes
the nature, characteristics, meaning, and application of the work of student affairs as
partners in the broader campus curriculum (NASPA/ACPA, 2004). Learning
Reconsidered advocates for a coordinated, campus-wide effort to create
transformative educational experiences for students in all aspects of their lives
(NASPA/ACPA, 2004). As an effort, creating educational experiences for students
should include student affairs, educators, and faculty focusing on LLCs (Wawrzynski,
Jessup-Anger, Stolz, Helman, & Beaulieu, 2009, p. 138).

 Students entering college have a far greater variability in preparedness for
college-level work than in the past (NASPA/ACPA, 2004). Also, a much higher
proportion of American high school graduates now have access to a form of
postsecondary education. College attendance promotes learning and intellectual
development for its intended beneficiaries; however, learning gains that are equally
distributed across racial or ethnic lines remain questionable (Flowers & Pascarella,

2003). Researchers have found negative stereotypes about African American students' intellectual ability, which can have a damaging effect on their adjustment to college (Steele, 1997).

Jackson (2007) suggested that African American students' involvement and success is influenced by pre-college characteristics, racial composition of the college, and students' college experiences; additionally, involvement levels for African American students are often influenced by their self-perceptions of racial identity, awareness, and self-concept. When discussing students of color and higher education, they are attending college and universities at a higher rate than before, yet, a gap remains in the retention of minority students after their freshman year (Ward, 2006).

Researchers found student integration and engagement, socially and academically, as critical determinants of success (Zander et al., 2013). In general, student support services are related to improved academic outcomes for upperclassmen and students' first year in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). With the combination of the TRIO program and student support services, each department has a responsibility of aiding students to decrease academic and nonacademic challenges plaguing minority groups as they enter a college campus. The purpose of Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services, collectively known as the federally funded TRIO program, is to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities so they can progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post baccalaureate programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The purpose of this research study is to analyze the beliefs of first-generation African American students taking part in a TRIO Living Learning Community and how the program has impacted the transition from high school to freshmen year for minority students at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Additionally, aiding in the developmental programming of the program.

Educational Progression for Minority Students

Higher education is characterized as "one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress in this country," yet for many Americans, "it has been part of the problem rather than the solution" (Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009, p. 389). In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court ruled the doctrine of "separate but equal" had no place in the educational system, deeming separate educational facilities inherently unequal ("History – Brown v. Board," 2018). Laws and results from this significant case did not fully ensure fair educational access, especially for minority students. In 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, informally known as the Kerner Report, concluded America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal" (Anderson, 2017, p. 75S).

Through various challenges, African Americans have recognized the importance of education as a tool for transforming their lives and their communities (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2015). HBCUs were set up following the American Civil War to become "lighthouses" for African Americans prohibited from attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) for higher education ("A Snapshot

of African American," 2010). HBCUs are known as "seats of Black progress" due to

their supportive campus environments and open opportunity structures (Boyd, 2007,

p. 547). HBCUs play a major role in the development of students to understand

themselves professionally and personally, resulting in an opportunity for a level of

support that may not be possible at other institutions where they were not welcomed.

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was an attempt to reach equality of

education for African Americans, with policies implemented to ensure equitable

educational opportunities. One of the biggest access-related policies for public higher

education, and later for African Americans, emerged in 1862 with the enactment of

the First Morrill Land Grant Act. This Act ushered in the agricultural and mechanical

arts educational movement, which supplied funds and 30,000 acres of land for the

establishment of a public institution in every state (Harper et al., 2009). The

enactment of the Second Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890 offered public support for

higher education for Black students. The Act required states with racially segregated

public higher education systems to provide a land grant institution for Black students

whenever a land grant was set up and restricted to White students. After the passage

of the second Act, the government set up public Black institutions in each of the

Southern and border states ("Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Higher

Education Desegregation", 2018).

Today's African American students are still challenged by the historical

vestiges of discrimination and barriers associated with socioeconomic and

environmental factors (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). An American

Council on Education (ACE) report indicated an evolving state of race and ethnicity in the higher education landscape and shows that although the number of students of color in college and university campuses continues to rise, gaps in access, attainment, and debt levels remain ("ACE Unveils New Resource," 2019, para. 1). According to the American Council on Education ("ACE Unveils New Resource," 2019) in 2017, more than four in 10 adults in the US ages 25 years and older had attained an associate degree or higher ("ACE Unveils New Resource," 2019). In 2018, the African American student college graduation rate of 46% was 23 percentage points lower than the rate for Whites, 31 percentage points below the rate for Asian Americans, and trailing the rate for Hispanic by 14 percentage points (McFarland, Cui, & Stark, 2018).

Experts said income for African Americans has improved significantly since the Civil Rights era, although it is still lower than the national average overall. According to State of Working America ("Income," 2018), the median income for African American families in 2010 was $39,715, which is down from $44,000 in 2000 during the Great Recession. The African American household income fell 10.1%, compared to 5.4% for White households. However, from 2007 to 2011, African American graduates saw their unemployment rate rise from 3.5% to 8.2% ("Income," 2018).

Despite the number of challenges African American students face, they are still entering four-year institutions at a growing rate. For students to cope with outside challenges and remain competitive, universities like HBCUs are using the theoretical

model of LLCs more than before, proposing peer-learning programs to resolve this

underachievement (van der Meer & Scott, 2013). LLCs for African American

students began as a focus group during the reform of higher education curriculum

(van der Meer & Scott, 2013). Although the stated results are stunning and detail the

educational gap of African Americans, demographers expect by 2020, students of

color will account for 46% of the nation's total student population (Seurkamp, 2007).

To accommodate this growth, learning communities appeared as an important asset to

connect the students and encourage involvement with various departments within

institutions.

In 2010, experts reported 49% of Black students as first-generation college

students and 46% enrolled in remedial courses. These statistics reinforce the need for

academic and social supports through efforts such as the Bridge program, first-year

experience courses, learning communities, and financial literacy programs ("A

Snapshot of African American," 2010). Implementation of various educational

initiatives tried to find solutions to the achievement gap problem. The federal

government has a long-standing reputation of supporting programs designed to

address issues surrounding minorities, particularly African Americans. Some of the

federal programs implemented opportunities for educational equity and accessibility

to higher education specifically for socioeconomically disadvantaged and

underrepresented minority groups (Ward, 2006, p. 55). DeFreitas and Rinn (2013)

stated that "the results of lower academic achievement and lower rates of persistence

among first generation college students may have stem from a variety of sources, in

general, research had indicated that first generation college students are less

academically prepared to enter college (p. 58)."

According to Lee (1999) African American students have proven that they are

invested in their future just as their ancestors were. Many students make an important

decision daily to commit to a four-year institution, whether they have a family with

college graduates, or they want to escape certain living circumstances. Despite the

reasoning, they have set expectations and engaged in experiences that could possibly

enhance their rate of college completion.

According to Demetriou & Schmitz-Scriborski (2011), Tinto (1975)

developed a theoretical model of student retention that is still a popular

conceptualization of the attrition phenomena in higher education. Tinto viewed

colleges and universities as organizations composed of two interacting systems: an

academic system and a social system. Student retention results from a combination of

students' entering characteristics, their commitment to the institution, their

commitment to goals, their academic and social experiences in college (integration

into the campus environment) (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). The core of

the model is the process of students' academic and social integration into the campus

environment (Lee, 1999, p. 28).

To understand the students' academic and social integration into the campus

environment, the investigator must consider the perspectives of African American

students in a TRIO-themed LLC at an HBCU. Additionally, students' shared

experiences supplied detailed information about the program and the aid received

during their integration process, both academically and socially, to ease their adjustment to the higher educational learning environment.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This qualitative study supplied an opportunity and safe space for students to voice their thoughts and opinions about living and interacting within a living learning community. This study helped current students realize that other students may have similar challenges, struggles, and expectations; additionally, it will help inform administration about the successes and shortcomings of the program.

Two dimensions of an LLC add value to higher education: primary membership and primary interaction (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). For this research study, the researcher discussed the primary membership of a learning community. Primary membership differentiates the characteristics the group members have in common, such as learning organizations, faculty learning communities, and student learning communities. This study was an exploration of the category of residential living-learning as composed of TRIO students.

No single definition exists for explaining an LLC. However, for the purpose of this study, a TRIO LLC is a section of a residence hall, floor, or wing in which the residents, under the direction of resident assistant (RA), attempt to combine academics within the social and living environment (Connelly, 2014). The TRIO LLC is a relatively small group of students and staff working together to enhance their learning and development of each other to become well-rounded, broad-based

individuals (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). An LLC is a residence hall–based

undergraduate program with a topic or academic theme for incorporating structured

programmatic interventions to bring students and faculty together in meaningful

ways, including the students' living, meeting, and attending classes together (Inkelas

& Soldner, 2011).

Researchers have found that LLCs have a positive impact on academic

performance, intellectual development, civic engagement, and smooth transition for

first-year students into college life (CIC, 2015). American colleges have used

residential education as part of the undergraduate experience since the Colonial era

(Katz, 2015). Although the number of reported active residential LLCs is unknown,

the programs have value. According to Inkelas and Soldner (2011), participation in

LLCs is associated with a range of desirable student outcomes, including academic

performance, persistence, intellectual development, faculty and peer interaction,

transition to college, campus life, satisfaction, academic engagement and cocurricular

involvement, attitudes and beliefs, self-efficacy, and psychosocial development.

Even with many publications and research surrounding the impact of LLCs,

no firsthand exists for learning communities, with lack of student experiences of

diverse learners. The overall objectives of this study were (a) to add to existing

literature in describing the perspectives of African American, first-generation students

of an LLC, (b) to give a voice to the students through the study of a TRIO program,

and (c) to describe the impact of an LLC on students who have successfully

transitioned from high school to their freshman year of college.

Terminology

- **First-generation**: College students whose parents have never earned a bachelor's degree but may have had some postsecondary experience. The term stands for a person classified as the first in the family to attend college and to obtain a bachelor's degree (Hottinger & Rose, 2006, p. 123).

- **African American students**: African Americans come from a diverse range of cultures and countries in Africa, then later from the Caribbean and Central and South America. However, "Black" and "African American" are relatively interchangeable. The history of African Americans prior to shipment to the shores of America and engaged in the Black experience of America produced the African American culture (Scott, 2005).

- **TRIO**: The federal TRIO programs are outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to aid low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities in progressing through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs (Department of Education, 2016).

- **Living Learning Community (LLC):** Student learning communities are relatively small groups of students and faculty working together to

enhance students' learning, help them become well-rounded, broad-based

individuals, and supply more effective learning (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

They are categorized by student populations such as first-year students,

first-generation students, and upper-class students with specific academic

interests. LLCs can take place in a variety of residential settings from

traditional dorms to yurts on a college campus (Colleges, 2005).

- **Predominantly white institution (PWI):** An institution made up of 50%
  or more of a White student population.

Rationale for study

The rationale for the current study was to understand the perspectives of first-

generation African American students that are living in a TRIO-themed LLC at an

HBCU. Understanding the perspectives and the support of LLCs will help universities

better market, implement, and assess their current program. Students' interactions

with one another and their environment can give them the necessities for making it

pass their first year. Those necessities are imperative to a freshman student's

transition and help universities increase their retention rates. Universities can design

environments and activities supportive of subpopulations such as first-generation,

minority, and low-income students (Thayer, 2000).

Researchers found the concept of student LLCs beneficial for the mental,

social, and cultural development of student in fostering academic success and global

awareness. Shiven and Olcott (2001) asserted students who could develop and build

their personal, social, and academic skills within a pedagogical community may be more advanced in their ability to foster new communities within their professional careers. According to Connor and Killmer (2001), when faculty and students approach an LLC holistically, individuals are more motivated to learn.

Understanding the Problem

Researchers and policymakers rarely include the individuals in the focus of their studies on the development of solutions to solve their own problems (Freeman, 1997). According to Freeman (1997), "although individuals or groups are often asked their opinions about their plight, they are seldom asked to participate in the development of programs or models that will change their lives (p. 523)." Some researchers have argued for students to achieve academic success they need a positive academic orientation, meaning that their self-esteem must be partly contingent on their academic outcomes (O'Hara, Gibbons, Weng, Gerrard & Simons, 2012). According to O'Hara et al., cross-sectional studies of African Americans show that discrimination is negatively related to academic identity, persistence and curiosity, school belongingness, and GPA. The research studies' results may not represent all groups such as African Americans, multicultural, international, first-generation, and disabled students.

Minority groups such as African Americans are rarely included in research studies. Researchers tend to focus on increasing the motivations and aspirations of African American students for attending higher education and exclude cultural

considerations. The prescription for attracting and keeping student is necessary based on educational models that have paid little, if any, attention to the heritage and culture of African American (Freeman, 1997, p. 525). This study allowed minority, first-generation students an opportunity to share feelings and details on the impact of the LLC as they persist in reaching a higher education. The LLC program can provide a learning environment that values students' development by allowing a safe space for the students' heritage, culture, and perspectives.

Furthermore, this research study can offer solutions to LLCs in their quest to supply student support, networking opportunities, and educational resources. Living Learning models provide students with transferable skills usable outside of an educational setting and equip them for life postgraduation. Sanguinetti, Waterhouse, and Maunders (2005) affirmed residential LLCs depict "good practice" methods, a term used in adult and community education to mean a practice of engaging people in the process of learning while fostering their overall personal, intellectual, and social development (p. 271).

Schön contended education is a perfect example of the mismatch between research and practice. He said the problems that are meant to be solved in education are complex and ill-formed and are not as simple as stated for improving learning and assessing learning outcomes (Price, 2005). Furthermore, his questioned the knowledge already embedded in competent practices of practitioners. The assessment of how students and faculty work together collaboratively show a gap of the

representation of the relationship they form. However, the embedding of student

learning communities' results from the practice of scholarship (Price, 2005).

This research study will explore how well minority, first-generation, college

students adjust to a higher learning environment at an institution that is rich in

historically African American culture. Additionally, this study allowed students to

express their individual perceptions of living learning environments by using their

own voices, ideas, and realities. The voices can supply valuable insight to assist

researchers, institutions, staff and policymakers, as well as guide future research

literature regarding students of color and their educational environments pertaining to

HBCUs.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects of a research

study, as it supplies a foundation from which all knowledge is constructed

(metaphorically and literally; Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Critical race theory (CRT)

contributed to building the foundation of this study. This study is grounded in CRT

because the theory depicts how an educational system classifies racism and race. The

researcher used "racism" as defined by Marable in 1992 as "a system of ignorance,

exploitation, and power used to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific

Americans, American Indians and other people based on ethnicity, culture,

mannerisms, and color" (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

According to Ladson-Billings (1998), CRT stems from the frustrations and the slow progression of equality. Derrick Bell (an African American) and Alan Freeman (a White) argued against the traditional approaches of filing lawsuits, organizing, and conducting protests and marches, and appealing to the masses of citizens because produced smaller and fewer gains than in the previous times. Borne out of a movement known as critical legal studies, CRT began as a leftist movement challenging the traditional legal scholarship that focused on doctrinal and policy analysis. CRT was a form of law addressing the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural context. The critical legal theorist fundamentally questions the dominant liberal paradigms prevalent and pervasive in American culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

 CRT is the basis for this study due to the advocacy throughout history for African Americans. The discriminatory treatment and limited educational access of minorities, the physical and mental treatment, and current challenges continue to cycle. The educational attainment for African Americans has many unanswered questions. The forward movement of the conceptual legal and political social order of CRT is in disclosing inconsistencies, incoherence, silences, and blindness. By challenging legal formalists, legal positivists, and legal realists, the concept combines explanation of the legalities and the unethical treatment of minorities in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). An example of CRT occurs through the attention of researchers give to and write about the achievement gap between African American and White students in a variety of educational settings. Although hypothesized,

studied, and documented, the Black -White achievement gap continues as a perennial educational issue (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Jackson, 2008). According to Solórzano et al. (2000):

> When a collegiate racial climate is positive, it includes at least four elements: a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color; and (d) a college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism. In its negative form, these researchers conclude, these elements are less likely to exist on college campuses (p. 68).

This study allowed for exploring issues of providing a collegiate racial climate as it relates to African American students who attend a HBCU. For example, African Americans' current attitudes about attending college include the idea that most of the faculty and staff looks like them and the perceptions of how a college readiness is setting them up for success. To add to this, interviewing students who have decided to relocate to attend college is imperative. The researcher's understanding of their perceptions offers insight about their college preparedness and their transition process from high school to college as first-generation college students.

Research Questions

To further elaborate the purpose of this study, the investigator proposed the following research questions to gather data from first-generation African American, low-income students who are enrolled and actively engaged in an LLC at an HBCU.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of an LLC participant of an LLC program?

RQ2: What is the impact of an LLC on a first-generation, minority student attending a minority-serving institution?

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This review of literature presents a historical and contextual background about themed LLCs, especially at HBCUs. The information includes a discussion about the effectiveness of LLCs through the perceptions of first-generation African American students who attend an HBCU and participate in a TRIO-themed learning community. Furthermore, the review of literature provides an explanation in the perceived educational gaps of students' understanding of LLCs and the importance of helping students transition from high school to a higher learning educational institution.

African Americans and Higher Education

The importance of a college degree in the United States is becoming increasingly clear (Brittian, Sy, and Stokes, 2009). A small but rich collection of studies indicate what makes the HBCU experience sweeter for African American students. HBCUs appear more appealing because of their ability to provide greater satisfaction, social support, and faculty support, as well as having fewer racial

incidents and sentiments (Terenzini, Yaeger, Bohr, Pascarella, & Amaury, 1997, p. 3).

The racism students encounter is at the root of disparities, especially as it relates to high school completion and college readiness. In reality, many Black and Latino students encounter markedly inadequate educational opportunities in high school (Eskenazi, Eddins, & Beam, 2003). Additionally, teachers' expectations for and visions of students' impact outcomes, with students of color and living in poverty facing lower expectations and inequitable access to high-quality learning opportunities (Conklin, Hawley, Powell, & Ritter, 2010). The ultimate solution to this gap is the elimination of race and class prejudice and oppression. In the meantime, creating ultra-supportive environments appears the best and perhaps only chance for students from challenging backgrounds to be successful in school and life (Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018).

Attending an HBCU helps students of color flourish academically, emotionally, and physically while mapping out their vision of success. HBCUs see the importance of facilitating engagement and learning for students from non-white backgrounds (Marks & Reid, 2013). Although the campus of a minority serving institution is diverse, the integrative positive racial identity assists with the development and understanding through teaching and learning that is stimulating and culturally affirming experiences.

Whether success is determined by the perception of obtaining a good job, increasing income, finding one's passion or purpose, or simply making the logical

next step following high school; completing college significantly impacts the options

and lifestyles of many Americans (Marks & Reid, 2013). According to an article

published in the *Journal of Negro Education*:

> Although outcomes and opportunities vary as a function of the specific school
>
> that a student attends, as well as the major selected, higher education yields a
>
> return on time and financial investment for the masses of Americans paralleled
>
> by few other experiences. While African Americans have been legally
>
> oppressed for most of their time in the United States and have access to formal
>
> higher education since the mid-1800s, they have been affected by several shifts
>
> in the postsecondary landscape (Marks & Reid, 2013, p. 213).

According to Lee and Jang (2012), " From a historical perspective, the

articulated general purpose of historically black colleges and universities has been to

serve black students; in fact, the actual purpose of historically black colleges and

universities was not to enable the Black student to experience success in the larger

society, but to deter (student) attendance to attend a historically White college and

Universities (p. 913)". According to the United State Department of Education Office

of Civil Rights:

> Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were set up to serve the
>
> educational needs of black Americans. Prior to the time of their establishment,
>
> and for many years afterward, blacks were generally denied admission to
>
> traditionally white institutions. As a result, HBCUs became the principal

means for supplying postsecondary education to black Americans. Prior to the

Civil War, there was no structured higher education system for black students

(2011, n. p.).

Contrary to many beliefs, education has a profound impact on the individual

and society at large. It is one of the surest ways to increase one's social and economic

levels and overcome the barriers of poverty and deprived social conditions (Swail,

Redd, & Perna, 2003, p. 21).

African Americans have consistently strived for equitable education. Prior to

the Civil War, public policy and certain statutory provisions prohibited the education

of African Americans in various parts of the nation and deemed the act of educating

illegal; including educational settings and individuals that participated in educating

minorities. For example, in the case of *Berea v. Kentucky* (1908), a state law

prohibited individuals and corporations from operative schools that taught both

African American and white students (Decker, 2019, para. 1). As a result of colored

students unable to attend classes with Whites, HBCUs became known as universities

and colleges to make that happen (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) is the governing name for five separate

cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court concerning the issues of segregation in public

schools across the nation. Supreme Justice Thurgood Marshall raised a variety of

legal issues on appeal; however, the most common one stated separate school systems

for Blacks and Whites were inherently unequal and thus violated the "equal

protection clause" of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ("History –

Brown v. Board," 2018). Due to the historical disadvantages, African American

students' quest for educational attainment was unequal and unjust. Due to the

widespread discrimination and resistance on the part of northern Whites upon African

Americans, they could not receive basic or advanced learning experiences (Lee &

Jang, 2012, p. 913).

> According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy
>
> The movement for equal opportunity began at the landmark decision of *Brown*
>
> *vs the Board of Education* (1954) and peaked through the Civil Rights
>
> Movement (1955 – 1968). To prove the historical challenges and unequal
>
> treatment, the opposition of much of the nation due to the ruling of the court
>
> case resulted in violence and riots, which caused President Kennedy to send
>
> 5,000 federal troops to the campus of University of Mississippi after the
>
> enrollment of their first African American student. ("A Snapshot of African
>
> American," 2010).

This example of many exemplified the denial and frustrations of African Americans

from attaining an education.

Since *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), significant changes have occurred

in policies in equitable educational opportunities for all minority groups. However,

African Americans are unequally represented and dictated by their challenges.

Exposure to poverty and prejudice is uniform across the African American

population; however, not all African Americans are poor or failing in school. Even so,

their achievement and life circumstances are disproportionately constrained by race and class of the uniformed idea (Bowman et al., 2018).

The dimensions of underrepresentation students from low income, first generation, and ethnically diverse backgrounds in colleges and universities are still enormous (Thayer, 2000). According to Thayer (2000), even though African American students still enroll in higher education institutions at a higher rate than before, accessibility is a hollow promise when graduation rates are far below those of students from other backgrounds. The gaps in college opportunities contribute to a diminished social mobility within the United States, in turn influenced by disparities in students' experiences before graduating from high school. This is particularly true for people of color who share the same childhood and educational experiences, such as being low-income and first-generation college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Despite many challenges, HBCUs have survived serious adverse conditions and developed into indispensable institutions in the mosaic of U.S. higher education (Nichols, 2004). Over the years, HBCUs have shown impressive growth and with the results of increasing access to higher education for African American. However, the students still confront formidable challenges outside of the higher education community, including issues of leadership, low retention rates of students, and financial stability (Lee & Jang, 2012). The stagnation and decline in African American college participation are centralized around the increasing financial investment students make to attend a higher education institution. According to

Seltzer (2017), rising tuition costs and a decline in financial aid puts more of the

financial burden on students, challenging them to pay more for college each year

(para. 6). Demographers predict that by 2020, students of color will account for 46%

of the nation's total student population (Seurkamp, 2007). According to Sara Garcia

in an article published by the Center for American Progress (2018), "Nationally, as a

result of these spending gaps, public colleges spend approximately $5 billion less

educating student of color in one year than they do educating white students" (para.

4).

TRIO: Federally Funded Program

Accessibility to a higher education institution is a gateway of economic

empowerment for thousands of students who enter the nation's postsecondary

institutions each year (Lee, 1999). Degree completion and attainment should allow

individuals access to equal opportunity for competition in an economically driven

society. However, although completion rates may be discouraging for students in

general, they are more disheartening for African American students. Positive social

and psychological college environments influence students' educational passions and

the efforts they put forth (Cox, Dorley & Wodaje, 2018, p. 194).

According to Engstrom & Tinto (2008), his theoretical model of student

retention is one of the popular theories used. He viewed colleges and universities as

organizations composed of two interacting systems: an academic system and a social

system. Demaris and Kritsonis (2007) published a study urging that HBCUs consider

adopting residential learning communities as a strategy to improve minority student retention.

      After published data showed gaps in minority students' federal intervention at the postsecondary level, the government intervened, focused primarily on reducing economic barriers to higher education to ensure no academically qualified citizen is denied access to college for financial reasons (Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002). In August 1964, during Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," the President signed the Economic Opportunity Act (Lomotey, 2016). Once President Johnson realized the issue of poverty, the government created a program to help. According to Lomotey, the government created the Office of Economic Opportunity and Special Programs for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, a program commonly known as the nation's TRIO programs (2016). The commitment was a broad educational opportunity for all Americans regardless of racial or ethnic background, gender, or economic circumstances. As a result, the establishment of programs helped low-income Americans enter and succeed in college (Coles, 1998). According to Coles:

      Although student aid programs help many students overcome the financial barriers to higher education, TRIO programs address the social, economic, academic, and cultural barriers to higher education facing low-income students who are often among the first generation in their families to attend college. (p. 432)

      TRIO originally comprised three programs: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. However, the TRIO program today includes the

Educational Opportunity Centers, Veterans Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, and the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement programs (Coles, 1998). A TRIO program–themed LLC at an HBCU is imperative to the campuses because it provides a boost for academically capable students.

The world needs students, no matter their background, who are academically prepared and motivated to achieve success ("Council for Opportunity in Education-TRIO", n. d). According to the National Governors' Association, the achievement gap is a matter of race and class. Across the U.S., a gap in academic achievement persists between minority and disadvantages students and their white counter parts (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 3). Additionally, the Council for Opportunity in Education (2018) noted that TRIO programs were implemented for helping low-income students from being left behind; therefore, the growing achievement gap in our country is detrimental to the success of the nation.

The TRIO programs include students with various talents and academic gifts and have various programs that are found at almost 1,000 campuses; African Americans and minority students have been researched for benefitting the most from participating in the TRIO program. According to the National TRIO Clearinghouse Factsheet, out of every 25 UB students in 2000-01, approximately 11 were Black, six were White, five were Hispanic/Latino, one was an American Indian or Alaska native and one was Pacific Islander or multiracial. Blacks and White students account for the largest racial groups in TRIO programs, race and ethnicity data is difficult to quantify due to classification issues ("Racial and Ethnic Diversity," 2000). TRIO programs

have assisted many students with opportunities that may have not been feasible if they were not participants in one of the program areas of the TRIO program.

Boyer (1997, as cited in Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009) characterized higher education as "one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress in this country. Yet for many Americans, however, it has been seen as part of the problem rather than the solution" (p. 389). Common knowledge indicates investing in some form of higher education benefits both society and individuals. As compared to their White counterparts, African Americans are still at a disadvantage. On average, an African American family earns 42% less than a White family. This earning disparity has the potential to affect the chances of an African American family member enrolling and persisting in college (Karanja & Austin, 2014).

According to Levin (1986), pupils who are defined as educationally disadvantaged lack the home and community resources enabling them to succeed in conventional educational settings. Due to poverty, racial/ethnic and cultural distinctions, or linguistic abilities, the educationally disadvantaged have low academic achievement and/or drop out of the educational pipeline at high rates and early stages (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

First-Generation College Students

Despite rising university costs and recent debates about the value of higher education, obtaining a bachelor's degree remains one of the most critical pathways to economic and social mobility in the United States (Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, &

Santiago, 2015). First-generation college students include those whose parents and guardians have not achieved a bachelor's degree. For this study, I will use this definition because it is the most adopted definition used by college admissions administrators. However, the definition is often a barrier because the parents' degree status allows them to provide more to their children. Parents with bachelor's degrees typically give their children more social capital related to attending and succeeding in college, as these parents or guardians achieve more prestigious careers compared to those who do not (Garriott et al., 2015).

Pupils that are defined as educationally disadvantaged or "at-risk" lack the home and community resources to fully receive help from conventional schooling practices (Levin, 2017, p. 1). In the United State, First Generation College Student are underrepresented in higher education, comprising about 24% of the undergraduate population (Levin, 2017, p. 1). Additionally, previous studies estimated that this proportion is much larger at regional four-year public institutions than at elite research institutions or liberal arts colleges and universities (Levin, 2017, p. 1). Analyzing the failure of higher education to serve as an equalizer for poor or first-generation college students requires paying close attention to the experiences of students in regional public university because of the role these institutions play as gateways for young people from poor and working-class families (Gray, 2013, p. 1245)

Universities recruit students from local high schools, often cultivating a demand from first-generation, low-income students, and students of color – but often

without investing much effort into ensuring the success or graduation of students they

admit (Gray, 2013, p. 1245). Zhao and Kuh (2004) proposed that HBCUs can benefit

for utilizing a learning community. The student-type communities are the best type of

LLC because they are specifically designed for targeted groups, such as academically

underprepared students, historically underrepresented students, honor students, as

well as students with disabilities, similar academic interests. However, researchers

have suggested the learning experiences of underrepresented student groups

including, but not limited to, students of color and student with disabilities remain

underserved in publications (Engstorm & Tinto, 2008).

Campus life is a different world, offering an array of various experiences in

academics, social, religious, and political sectors. The themed student learning

communities are on campus to help with the student's adjustment to the newfound

world of academia. However, student learning communities are not just present to

solve student issues but appear as accountability measures from external

stakeholders. Many demands come from external stakeholder agencies aiming to

hold institutions accountable for the development of students. U.S. colleges and

universities use various student learning communities to help their students

transition both socially and academically. The range of benefits includes, promoting

of self-understanding, encouraging higher levels of reasoning and critical thinking,

improving interpersonal skills, making learners take more active roles and

increasing adult motivation (Dallmer, 2004, p. 4).

First-generation, African American students face the same challenges and barriers that multicultural students face as they enter college. The term of "first generation" college student varies; however, the context is still that first generation represents a student being the first in their immediate family to attend a college. However, the description of being the first in one's family to attend college must be re-evaluated to decide what technically constitutes a first-generation college student. For usage of this research, first generation students will be defined as students being the first of their immediate family to enroll at a college or University.

The first- generation student groups are composed of students from both, multicultural and African American backgrounds. Many challenges that both groups face is due to their classification of being first-generation and low-income. Since they are welcomed by such challenges, their judgment of attending college is clouded due to their circumstances. Therefore, the experiences and lack of examples place first-generation students at a disadvantage when entering a college program.

In a previous study conducted by Van & Bui (2002), many of the participants reported and gave higher ratings of the importance for attending college to the reasons of gaining respect/status, bringing honor to their family, and helping their family out financially after they have completed their college degree.

Living Learning Communities

To understand, define, and constitute learning communities, Inkelas and Soldner (2012) categorized them by typology, as follows:

- paired or clustered courses;

- smaller cohorts among large enrollments, including FIGs and federated learning communities;

- coordinated or team-taught series of courses;

- learning community for special populations (e.g., women in STEM majors);

- residential-based learning communities; and

Student learning communities are the most dominant types of LLCs currently available on college and university campuses. Paired or clustered learning groups connect individually taught courses through cohort or block scheduling, in which small groups of students enrolled together as a block take the same courses together (Price, 2005). The cohort group in large courses is a freshman work group (Fenning, 2004) of 20 to 30 students who stay together from the beginning of a program to the end. Participants grow through the process, developing community and support by experiencing the same stimulus material and challenges of the work environment.

The team-taught model dynamic provides faculty with the opportunity to co-create curricula and organize two or more courses around an interdisciplinary theme. The themes can be broad-based, emphasize skill development, and/or prepare students for professions. Team teaching models provide faculty with a platform for expanded intellectual resources and a larger variety of personal experiences to draw upon to enhance students' learning experiences (Sullivan, Colburn, & Fox, 2013).

The residence-based program combines student residential life into the academic environment. This concept is based on the belief that not all education happens in the classroom. In the residence-based program, students enroll in specific courses together and live in a dedicated living space, with the implemented curriculum following the previously listed models. This program also allows ample opportunities for extracurricular activities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

The basic models of learning communities address the variation in which student learning communities are part of the university curricula. Learning communities provide the missing links for universities and incorporate "pedagogies of active engagement and reflection" (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, as cited in Price, 2005, p. 7). The purpose for the various models aims for all student learning communities "to foster a sense of community and shared purpose among learners and their teachers" (Smith et al., 2004, as cited in Price, 2005, p. 7).

The pedagogies of learning communities are important, so students and administrators have clarity on how to implement the program and how students perceive their experience. Literature shown faculty and students want more collaborative and experiential learning, a demand met by learning communities (Price, 2005). Researchers have also suggested implemented student learning communities can improve both learning environments and student outcomes (Price, 2005). Students that actively take part and live in the learning communities have opportunities to create closer relationships with professors and peers. Some studies have reported that students gain more from their college learning experiences and the

"engagement advantage" for students that last throughout their senior year that

positively affects what they do through the matriculation of their college career (Kuh,

Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea, 2008). Cross (2008) said the importance of learning

communities as linked to three specific reasons for their implementation:

philosophical, research-based, and pragmatic. The philosophical reasoning of student

learning communities is due to the changing philosophy of knowledge and the

flexibility of the learning community.

The research-based reasoning is because learning communities fit with what

others have published about them. The pragmatic reasoning is because the

engagement of an educational learning community simply works (Cross, 1998).

These reasons further prove the strong relation to all four National Survey of Student

Engagement ("Experiences That Matter," 2007) clusters or benchmarks of effective

educational practices, which include diversity experiences, student self-reported gains

in personal and social development, practical competence and general education, and

overall satisfaction with the undergraduate experience (Shapiro, 2008). Learning

communities are imperative for understanding how a residential learning experience

helps to holistically develop the student. Expanding the thinking about learning

communities encourages individuals to broaden their self-understanding (Gillespie,

2001). The view of communities is that of positive structures within society. Working

toward the greater pervasiveness of learning communities is a worthwhile goal in all

ways possible (Gillespie, 2001). Although residential learning communities are not

new, they are appearing more often. Decades ago, when most undergraduates lived

near their classmates and teachers, proximity and serendipity showed the social order

and instilled shared values and understandings (Kuh, 2008).

To accommodate the growing number of African American students, learning

communities appeared as important strategic tools campuses can use. Historically,

during the 1970s, with African American students classified as underachieving, they

became the primary focus to resolve the proposed underachievement peer learning

programs (van der Meer & Scott, 2013). A residential learning community may be a

determinant for some students to select larger or smaller institutions. LLCs also serve

as determinants in the students' choice of programs, aiding the transition to a new

environment. Additionally, LLCs are a resource to help students with their transition

to higher education programs and institutions by supplying more personable

interaction between the students, faculty, and staff.

Implementing LLCs is imperative to some institutions, as they serve as a

recruiting tool and a resource for retention. Through LLCs, theorists may better

understand how students develop holistically and connect to their higher education

environment. To determine this knowledge, researchers have collectively surveyed

students and their experiences.

Many theorists found student integration and engagement, both socially and

academically, as the critical determinant of success (Zander et al., 2013). Hotchkiss,

Moore, and Pitts (2006) conducted a comparable study focused on freshmen student

learning communities and their use as a mechanism by which college students can

develop a small community composed of peers with common interests. According to

Hotchkiss et al., psychological theories support that involving students in a small

community early in their academic careers improves student performance and

increases the likelihood of retention through developing confidence and facilitating

social integration. In a university setting, learning does not happen only in the

vacuum of a classroom, but rather inside and outside of the classroom (Ambrose,

Hauschild, & Ruppe, 2008). As learning communities are expanding and the

concepts are enlarging the ideals of learning communities, individuals are invited to

enlarge the understanding of themselves through their participation (Gillespie, 2001).

These communities have garnered acceptance as positive structures within

society. The greater pervasiveness of "learning communities" is something to work

toward in all ways possible (Gillespie, 2001). Learning communities have become

prominent throughout the history of U.S. higher education (Fink & Inkelas, 2015,

p. 5). Decades ago, before LLCs, most undergraduate students lived near their

classmates and teachers. Proximity and serendipity proved the social order and

instilled shared values and understanding (Kuh, 2007). In the contemporary form,

learning communities are commonly defined as "curricular linkages that provide

students with a deeper examination and integration of themes or concepts that they

are learning" (Fink & Inkelas, 2015, p. 5).

Most researchers are interested in learning communities because they offer

hope of making college more holistic by integrating learning experiences for students

(Cross, 1998). During the last few decades, researchers developed related theories to

address student success in higher education. Learning communities can range from

loosely structured programs offering students the opportunity to take a set of courses in common, to heavily structured programs of integrated courses team taught by faculty from a different discipline, with a cohort of students living together in residence halls (Cross, 1998). Whatever capacity the LLC, the ideas of developing a community of individuals and the benefits of learning and living with peers are the focal points of researchers.

According to Kuh (2008), students who live in a residential learning community tend to interact more with their professors and diverse peers, study more, and excel at synthesizing material and analyzing problems. In responding to Kuh's survey, students reported that they gained more from their college experience through participation in residential learning communities. Additionally, Kuh explained the "engagement advantage" for students in LLCs lasts through the senior year, and he suggested the experience most students have in their first college year positively affects what they do later in college. The interdisciplinary and interactive nature of LLCs introduces various groups of students to complex, diverse perspectives, critical thinking, and contextual learning (Bredemeier, 1998). The knowledge of incorporating and implementing these skills is critical during an era of information overload (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

The consistency of LLCs aligns with Piagetian constructivist and information processing paradigms in education. Wolff-Michael Roth and Lee Yew Jin, among other researchers and practitioners, found knowing and knowledgeability better thought of as a cultural practice showed by practitioners belonging to various

communities ("Learning Community," 2018). Their claims led to forms of praxis (learning and teaching designs implemented in the classroom and influenced by these ideas) in which students receive encouragement to share with each other their ways of approaching mathematics, history, sciences, and other subjects (Roth, n.d.). Roth asserted an important aspect of the community in the school of Moussac is children have a sense of self-determination and control over their activities and their learning. Based on the very nature of knowledge, the natural social structures for the ownership of knowledge are communities of practice. Though classrooms matter, especially as they may shape academic integration, few have explored how the experience of the classroom matters and how it comes to shape students' persistence over time (Tinto, 1997, p. 599).

Furthermore, learning communities benefit students and faculty for overall satisfaction and success in completing an educational program. For African American students, LLCs started as a focus group during the reform of higher education curriculum. Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified seven categories of effective education practices directly influencing students' learning and the quality of their educational experiences: student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talent and ways of learning. These seven categories relate to the principles of practice in a student learning community educational program. The student learning community framework connects the concept of self-authorship or holistic development with the explanation for the overlapping nature of an individual's

cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2011).

For a student living learning community to work efficiently, the culture of learning must be welcoming. As students feel welcomed in the learning environment, they begin to view themselves as contributors to their own learning and to the community. Students begin to take leadership roles regarding their education, afforded opportunities to reflect and become critical thinkers, to frame questions and develop a deep understanding of the issues they investigate, and to feel equipped to share their learning with others within the community (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999).

Banks (2001) found the need to explore more than one aspect of student learning communities as well as focus on the five dimensions of multicultural education that is important to the collegiate dimensions. These five dimensions are content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2001). Similarly, Tisdell (1995) provided important theoretical groundings for developing more culturally relevant teaching and learning environments for adults.

Implementing these perspectives into a collegiate classroom can assist students of multicultural backgrounds specifically African American students. African American students can feel comfortable and provide interactive dynamics similar to those in their families and cultures (Chavez, 2007). Student learning communities at HBCUs are growing relevant as implemented strategic measures to

improve minority student retention and lessen the gap between minorities and other racial groups.

The concept of student learning communities is beneficial to understanding the mental, social, and cultural development of students from diverse backgrounds and their transition to higher learning environments. Student learning communities are beneficial to understanding the mental, social, and cultural development of students from diverse backgrounds and their transition to higher learning environments. Students who can develop and build their personal, social, and academic skills within a pedagogical community may be more advanced in their ability to foster new communities within their professional careers (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). When student learning communities are approached by the faculty and students holistically, individuals are more motivated to learn or that is what is implied through the research (Connor & Killmer, 2001). When faculty and students approach student learning communities holistically, individuals are more motivated to learn (Connor & Killner, 2001). First-generation African American students who are part of a learning community feel included and respected within the learning group. They have positive attitudes toward the subject matter and show the ability to make learning meaningful to themselves and others (Mello, 2003).

Overall, the primary goals and the fundamental outcomes of learning communities include frequent faculty–student interaction, frequent student–student interaction, and time devoted to studying and collaborative learning opportunities, among others (Laufgraben, 2003). Intentionally interactive small group environments

facilitate the establishment of academic and social support networks inside and outside of the classroom (Collision, 1993). Learning communities equip students with the support, social environment, and resources needed to complete their transition into a degree program or college experience. Learning communities have emerged as one of the most important strategic tools campuses can use to increase student engagement and retention (Shapiro, 2008, p. 281). The key concept for a residential LLC, such as the TRIO-themed one, is the fostering of resilience and creating a process for value clarification to motivate students to adopt the skills and characteristics needed for academic success (Zander et al., 2013). The design of this proposed research study should articulate an understanding of LLCs that afford collective and individual learning support for first-generation African American students who are TRIO participants at an HBCU.

<center>Chapter 3: Methodology</center>

This study was a platform for students within an LLC to describe their individual perspectives and the impact of the programs through a personal narrative. In this narrative analysis, participants detailed their motivation, experiences, characteristics, and transitional process from high school to college. The narrative included interviews and observations of participants and staff members of the TRIO program. Through the interview process, students had the opportunity to express and describe in depth their individual perspectives of the residential living community, as well as the impacts of various life events that allowed them to remain persistent through the transitional process from high school to college.

Research Design

The research design for this study followed CRT. For this reason, the researcher chose to use a qualitative research design, specifically a narrative inquiry to allow themes to appear from the experiences and perspectives of student participants. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2006), a narrative inquiry begins in experiences as expressed in lived and told stories. The narrative inquiry involves the reconstruction of a person's experience in relationships with each other and to their social environment.

Many researchers conducting studies at PWIs have included minority students. Among the findings were that interviewed minority students indicated they are beyond feeling like a numerical minority, and they felt personally diminished by nonverbal microaggressions perpetrated by their White counterparts (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 67).

The interview approach was most appropriate for this study because its empowered participants to recall inspirational experiences, motivational factors in pursuing enrollment at an HBCU, and the impact the LLC had on the transitional process from high school to college. Additionally, they had a safe space to share ideas for future programming efforts. Minority students attending an institution created by African Americans for African Americans and other minorities have stories that are often muted, omitted, or downplayed. As a result, some literature created negative narratives about PWI versus HBCU experiences. Too often, minority students believe they must choose between a positive ethnic identity and a strong academic identity

(Nasir & Saxe, 2003, p. 14). This research study allowed participants to provide an in-depth interpretation of the LLC's impact and available resources to help them transition, thus offering insight to outsiders.

Giving students a platform to voice experiences through personal narratives can assist higher educational professionals in gaining a better understanding of how programs impact students throughout the college process, helping to debunk the myths often placed on first-generation students. Over the last 40 years, researchers have conducted numerous studies on the impacts of HBCUs on African American students; an overwhelming majority of the findings attest to the beneficial academic and developmental effects of HBCUs for African American and other minority students (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014).

This study is based on a structured interview process (see Appendix D) with 10 African American students in the TRIO program. For students to take part in the study, they must have been at least 18 years of age, first-generation students, African American, classified with low-income status, and in their freshman year.

Interview Questions

Following is a list of questions were guided categories for the research and data collection:

1. What experiences do first-generation college students attending an HBCU perceive as impacting their academic success?

2. What experiences do first-generation college students attending an HBCU

    perceive as impacting their nonacademic success?

3. What personal factors do first-generation students attending an HBCU

    perceive as impacting a successful transition from high school to college?

Research Site and Participants

The TRIO program used for this research is at a public, well-known HBCU in

a Southern state. The HBCU selected was North Carolina A&T State University

(NCAT). NCAT was founded in 1891 as a land-grant institution and has made history

with its well-known Civil Rights roots. The university is in an urban area in the

middle of an urban city, with a separate demonstration farm in a rural area. NCAT

prides itself on interdisciplinary learning opportunities, renowned faculty,

connections with cutting-edge discoveries in research, and encouragement for

students to give back to the student population community and the local community

supporting the university. NCAT has a primary reputation for human–machine

studies, entrepreneurship and e-business, advanced journalism, public health,

transportation, veterinary sciences, and agriculture. It also celebrates one of the

biggest homecoming events, grossing approximately $11.3 million annually for the

city (Carter, 2012). A memorable event that encourage students' enrollment.

The university's Student Support Services is the host department for the TRIO

program. The TRIO program mandates are set by the Department of Education

(2011), in order to fulfill requirements the program must provide: academic tutoring

and study skills in mathematics, science, and other subjects; advice and assistance in

postsecondary course selection, assist student with information on the full range of

student financial aid programs, benefits and resources for locating public and private

scholarships; and assistance in completing financial aid applications ("Student

Support Services", 2019). Additionally, the Student Support Services department

offers services similar to TRIO, with both the educational and counseling services

designed to improve student financial and economic literacy and assist them in

applying for graduation and professional programs. The program provides

individualized counseling for personal, career, and academics as well as activities and

instruction designed to acquaint students with career options and expose them to

cultural events and academic programs not usually available. It also offers mentoring

programs and temporary housing during breaks for students who are homeless youth,

living in foster care, or aging out of the foster care system (U.S. Department of

Education, 2011).

The TRIO program at NCAT State University is responsible for assigning

housing and assisting students with early registration deadlines. According to the

program counselor, the TRIO program LLC received funds from the federal

government to serve a capacity of 200 students. The program has grown since its

implementation at NCAT. It currently services and houses 12 students, with Student

Support Services working with 200 students through its their other programs. The

program typically supplies aid to the students in a more personal manner during the

summer prior to their first academic year and offers support until the end of their

freshmen year. Even when students are no longer classified as first-year students, they can continue to receive help from Student Support Services.

The TRIO program's intent is to equip students with opportunities for academic development, assist them with basic college requirements, and motivate them toward successfully completing their postsecondary education. The TRIO program comprises a series of programs funded under the Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, created to assist disadvantaged Americans in overcoming class, social, and cultural barriers to higher education. Originally represented in TRIO were the initial three programs of Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Support Services (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

For this narrative qualitative study, a large sample size was not feasible due to the number of students currently enrolled in the program. Eleven students participated in this study out of a program population of 12. The sample size was a valid reflection of the participants in the TRIO program. For research purposes, I proposed conducting research with all African American students; however, one participant was a minority (White) student at the majority African American–serving institution. The student was unable to take part because they did not meet the researchers' guidelines. Students who participated in the study had to meet the following requirements: 18 years of age or older, African American, first-generation, and low income as determined by the standards of the TRIO program and based on their financial aid status. The students met all the above requirements set forth by the researcher, which also reflected the requirements of Student Support Services and the

U.S. Department of Education for the TRIO program ("History of the Federal,"

2011).

Chapter 4: Findings/ Identified Strategies

A narrative analysis from structured interviews enabled the researcher to

evaluate the students' perceived college preparedness and motivation, as well as the

future implications of the TRIO LLC. Prior to interviewing the participants, the

researcher sent a required application to the Institutional Review Board at Morehead

State University as well as a visiting researcher application to NCAT. Awaiting both

approvals, the researcher contacted the LLC Executive Director to schedule a meeting

date and time. After the meeting, the Executive Director introduced the researcher to

one of the academic counselors who worked one on one with the students.

After contacting the academic counselor, the researcher allotted a specific

time to meet with the students and conduct an informational presentation about the

research study. The academic counselor recommended the presentation for two

reasons: (a) to ensure adherence to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

(FERPA) laws and (b) to answer any questions the students had about the research

data process. After the presentation, students could determine their interest in taking

part in the study. If they wanted to take part, they voluntarily shared their contact

information with the researcher, removing any legal liabilities from the program's

administration. Each participant personally received a copy of the consent forms (in

Appendix B). The counselor reiterated that participating in the research study was

voluntary. One requirement of the consent form allowed participant to enter their phone numbers and e-mail addresses in case a follow-up was necessary for them to elaborate more about their experiences. Further participant recruitment following the group meeting came from a follow-up email sent to LLC students by the Executive Director and the program counselor. The study transpired over one full academic year (fall and spring semester), with the fall semester used to discuss the study with the Executive Director, learn more about the LLC, determine the program guidelines, learn more about the program's qualifications, and complete the visiting researcher IRB process with NCAT and Morehead State University.

   According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, interviews are a part of collecting data for qualitative studies and an effective tool to attend to and unravel meanings elaborated upon by the subjects in their speeches, stories, and experiences (2019). Narratives typically occur when one or more speakers engage in sharing and recounting an experience or event and take the story as the investigative focus (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2019).To unravel the meaning by the subjects, the researcher conducted a structured, audio interview via online with each participant using the question prompts in Appendix D. Interview recordings accompanied field notes and observations, all of them subsequently transcribed and reviewed. After the interview was completed, they were reviewed and transcribed. Participants received a copy of their narratives (member checking) in case they wanted to add, change, or omit information from the study. The consent form (Appendix C) was explained at the beginning of the interview process and participants were asked to sign it.

The researcher used a set of predetermined questions to prompt conversations. The researcher used broad, open-ended questions that prompted responses without having to ask more, overly specific questions. Participants had 45-60 minutes to complete the interview and the allotted time allowed students to share as much or little information regarding their background, perspectives of current program, and the adjustments they had to make with their transition from high school to college and suggestions for further improvement. There were a few close ended questions that were asked to determine the demographics such as race and their sexual preference. The demographic data details the participants racial makeup of the living learning community to determine the representation of African Americans in the LLC at a HBCU.

Obtaining stories told by participants was the goal of the study. Specifically focusing on of how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). For this study, the researcher used a narrative analysis, an approach allowing the usage of storytelling and sense-making from African American students enrolled in a TRIO LLC at a HBCU. The names of participants have been changed to respect their privacy and minimize risks.

Ethical Considerations

According to the U.S. Department of Education, FERPA is a federal law set up in 1974 to protect the privacy of students' education records. FERPA applies to all schools and programs receiving funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education (2019). The law has two parts, the first part giving students

the right to inspect and review their own educational records, request corrections, halt

the release of personally identifiable information, and obtain a copy of their

institution's policy concerning access to education records. The second prohibits

educational institutions from disclosing "personally identifiable information in

education records" without the written consent of the students or, if the student is a

minor, the students' parent (Electronic Privacy Information Center, 2019). If federally

funded programs do not adhere to these laws, they are at risk for losing that funding.

Since this research study design involved the use of students enrolled in a

public institution and a federally funded program, the administrative team could not

release students' personal information. The researcher kept participants fully

informed about their legal rights in taking part in the study, which meant obtaining

signed consent forms and assuring confidentiality throughout every phase of the

study. The researcher also obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board

from Morehead State University and as a visiting researcher at North Carolina A&T

State University.

Limitations

The study of LLCs is not new; however, the program information is

constantly evolving. LLCs are more prevalent and a selling point for college

campuses. Since LLCs are growing with universities' present enrollment, the

researcher found that most of the literature on this phenomenon is dated. This reveals

the need for reevaluating LLCs to reflect the current climate of higher education. For

example, the literature should reflect the diverse learners (minority, international,

nontraditional, etc.), incorporate minority-serving institutions, and include more that

reflect the participants of the study. There is a minimum of research tailored to

student learning communities, including diversity-serving institutions such as

HBCUs. Demaris and Kritsonis (2007) urged more HBCUs to consider adopting

residential learning communities as a strategy to improve minority student retention.

Until now, researchers have not focused on the academic and social engagement of

students living in LLCs at an institution where first-generation, minority students are

the majority. Most studies are tailored to the inquiry of a specific field, such as

STEM, honors society, or nursing.

Additionally, working with smaller institutions poses a challenge because of

less-sizeable departments. Faculty and staff at smaller institutions tend to wear many

hats and are pulled in many directions. In my experience, the staff members the

researcher worked with held more than one position at a time within the university

and the turnover/transition rate was high. For example, the coordinator was promoted

during the process, serving in dual roles as Director of Student Support Services and

Executive Director of the TRIO program. Therefore, trying to contact the proper

parties to schedule meeting times was more complicated and the communication

among staff members was difficult. Additionally, no department or program shared

the FERPA laws governing the students with me before the process. Had the

researcher not checked multiple sources within the program, the program and the

researcher could have faced legal trouble, despite IRB approval.

Participants

The researcher obtained permission from the Executive Director and the Program Counselor to give a presentation to potential participants. Due to FERPA laws the researcher was unable to receive individuals' names, classifications, phone numbers, emails, or grade information. Also, the administrators of the program could not mandate students to take part in the study. To deflect liability from the program administrators, a program counselor invited me to speak at a weekly meeting with students. During this meeting, I shared more information about the research, what it entailed, and the need for consents with the student. The research also answered questions they had about the study. Students who chose to take part in the study returned the consent forms to me. This process was mandatory due to program staff not mandating the students to take part in the study. If students voluntarily shared their contact information, the university was no longer at risk of violating the schools FERPA policy. By receiving the intent to take part, the researcher had access to contact information such as e-mail addresses and phone numbers of the students who voluntarily returned their participation consent.

To keep confidentiality, the researcher kept participants anonymous by changing their names. The participating LLC participants met with me individually in a safe, private space for structured interview to share personal experiences and opinions. All participants completed the survey in 45 min.

Each of the participants were asked the following subset of interview questions

1) What experiences do first-generation college students attending a HBCU
perceive to impacting their academic success?

2)What experiences do first-generation college students attending a HBCU
perceive to impacting their non-academic (experiences outside of the
classroom) success?

3) What personal factors do first-generation students attending a HBCU
perceive to be a successful impacting in the transition from high school to
college?

Added questions helped guide the students' answers and allowed them to
supply any additional information they thought could be beneficial to the research
study.

Ashley

Ashley is an African American female originally from the city that NCAT is
found in. Through observation, Ashley personality reflected confidence. She exuded
confidence in her career choice, academics, and her social life. In a discussion in
Ashley's background, she was first introduced to the TRIO program during her
middle school years and took part throughout high school.

In reference to question one, Ashley said that the TRIO program and the
university gave her a safety net and provided an on-campus family. She said:

The residential Living Learning Community has provided more than a sense
of community. For example, I know that if I have a question or need
something, the other students or administrators of the program can provide a

solution. They have also supplied insightful tips for overcoming challenges

that I may encounter.

Ashley said that her academic challenges during high school involved creating a

study routine. She said that her study habits were not the best and test anxiety was her

most encountered challenge.

In reference to question two, Ashley grew up with perspectives and values

about attending college that were instilled in her by her mother. She was aware of

North Carolina A&T State University all her life because her mother is an alumnus of

the university. Ashley stated the dynamics of college were different because her

mother attended North Carolina A&T State University. Ashley described herself as

being very active during her high school career. She was an active participant in her

student government association and other student associations. She was crowned

prom queen. As well as a member of the National Honor Society. She also

participated in the annual high school charity powderpuff football game and was the

senior editor of her yearbook. She felt that her diverse experiences prepared her for

creating a balance between her academic and social life on campus. Her qualities of

being steadfast, hardworking, and displaying perseverance in her academic career

have helped her overcome some of the challenges and shaped her assimilation into

college. During high school, she had college-readiness resources such as SAT/ACT

Prep, writing courses, and AP courses, which she credited as contributing toward her

collegiate preparedness.

In reference to the third question, Ashley felt her longevity with the program helped her transitional process from high school to college. The program created a routine for her, and she had become use to it. She noted she was offered some of the same helpful and understanding advice at the university that she received during high school. Additionally, she gave credit to the program counselors and staff for being readily accessible in times of need, saying they were helpful with working with her busy schedule. Ashley said:

> My overall experience with the University and TRIO program has been great. I would not change a thing, in all honesty. The atmosphere of the office is so loving, I wish I had more time to visit. My recommendation for future students is to create a healthy line of communication and do not be shy to ask for help.

Jordan

Jordan is an African American female from a rural area in North Carolina. Jordan seemed very timid and shy; however, she is very smart. Although classified as a freshman, she took part in a dual enrollment program in high school at the local community college and earned enough credits to be a junior in college.

In reference to question one, Jordan classified herself as being a "normal" student. She was very active with youth council, which involved participating in community services and representing youth's decisions with various county commissioners and policymakers. She struggled in keeping up with her homework at

times; however, she acknowledged that her tightknit group of friends helped her through school. Neither of Jordan's parents attended college; however, she had an uncle working for another institution in the college system, so he was available to help her apply to colleges and search for scholarships. She was very excited to say her aunt recently completed her Bachelor of Science degree. Jordan said her uncle's and aunt's encouragement provided motivation to complete her 4-year degree.

In reference to question two, Jordan recalled preparing for a 4-year institution during high school. She was a dual-enrolled student through the early college program. By being enrolled in the program, she could complete her high school diploma and her associate degree within 5 years. However, as she was trying to find a balance, the college dropped her from one of her classes, which set her back. She felt she was prepared to enter college because of her dual enrollment program, which supplied her enough credits for being classified as a junior. During her dual enrollment program, she met the coordinator of the TRIO program at her local community college, who referred her to the TRIO program at NCAT. Jordan said that the TRIO program affected her decision to attend an HBCU. She was already considering the school, but the summer bridge program she took part in gave her more clarity about her decision. The TRIO program from the community college and the university helped her immensely in the journey from high school to college. She felt that, because she was in the program, she obtained firsthand information on some of the opportunities not available to others.

In reference to question three, Jordan said she would not change anything about the program and would encourage students to participate in it. Jordan said that:

Being at an HBCU has been different and an eye opener. I have always attended schools with a healthy mix of races, so being here is extremely different. I like it, though, because it shows me that I am not the only one with my career choice, that I am not the only Black female that wants to pursue this path of science.

Melanie

Melanie is an African American female from a Northern city accessible to many big cities in her area. In reference to question one, she described herself as an involved student. She was a track athlete and a part of her student government association. She recalled her struggles during her junior year in high school, saying she "encountered many of my academic challenges during my junior year because I had so many distractions that affected my work ethic." Although she had family members attend college, she was the first in her immediate family to do so.

In reference to question two, Melanie revealed her high school incorporated a college-readiness part by offering the flexibility to take college courses for free through the nearby community college. Because she took the courses, she felt it helped her in her transition and with her time management skills. She recalled being introduced to the TRIO program during her college orientation and thought she could receive help from the program. She gave positive remarks about the program's

accountability in keeping her focused during the semester and the program's staff helping boost her confidence. The program had instilled in her to work to the best of her ability.

In reference to question three, she recommended for future students to stick with the program and take advantage of the opportunities it offers, especially about information about scholarships. Additionally, she would not change anything, and she enjoyed attending the university.

Lauren

Lauren is a female African American student from a rural area located in North Carolina. In reference to question one, she was proud of being an above-average student. She said she was always on honor roll or the principal's list and had perfect attendance. She was a part of the student government association, Relay for Life committee, prom committee, green club, and video game club. She also was active member of her church and served as a youth mentor by teaching Vacation Bible School every summer. Although she was a great student, she revealed often having trouble in courses such as physics, math, and chemistry. Also, she sometimes had a hard time focusing in class.

Regarding question two, Lauren recalled her high school was not big on implementing college-readiness resources or courses into the curriculum. School administrators occasionally invited back earlier graduates to talk to the students about their college experiences. However, she said, attending a project-based learning

school meant she took part in a lot of group projects and presentations, so she felt it
was not an issue to meet new people, conduct presentations, and work with others.
TRIO program introduction came via an e-mail invitation to apply after she was
accepted into NCAT. This was her first experience working with the program.

She said the TRIO program did not influence her opinion to attend the
university; however, it assisted her in staying enrolled. Asked to expand upon her
response, she said the program offered an abundance of aid and supplied resources
she did not think she would have at another university. She felt she was prepared for
her transition because she attended the Summer Program, which helped her adjust to
the college campus and attending classes. She felt the program affected her life
because she created a campus family. Because of meeting a lot of people in the
program, she can always look forward to a familiar face. Program administrators of
the TRIO program made sure she had everything she needed.

Regarding question three, Lauren highly recommended the program to future
students. She suggested taking advantage of everything the program offers, such as
workshops, tutoring, and overall support. She felt the program she had attended over
the summer should offer classes for credit so students could have a jump start on
college credit hours. Lauren said, "Attending an HBCU is a great experience because
there is always someone that understands you and it feels like a family." Also, she felt
that because most of the teachers are Black, they cared more about her as a student,
and about her and another students' well-being.

Greg

Greg is an African American male who was born and raised in the city where NCAT is found. Regarding question one, Greg described himself as being the lazy type of student. Despite lacking academic motivation, he somehow kept As and Bs. His focus was predominantly on sports such as football. Although he lacked academic motivation, he was still inducted into the National Honor Society and National Technical Honor Society. Greg said he had some influence about college from his family members, but he rarely engaged in open discussions with his family because of the gap in age; in addition, many shared one-sided views about college attendance.

Regarding question two, although high school he attended did not offer any college readiness programs, but he felt he gained some knowledge and experience by attending the summer camp offered by the TRIO program on the campus of NCAT. Greg was introduced to the TRIO program when his mother signed him up. Although attending NCAT was a last-minute decision for him, he was grateful for taking part during the summer before his freshmen year. Because of his participation during the summer bridge program, his ability to catch on quickly allowed him to excel. He felt the TRIO program gave him a campus family.

Regarding question three, Greg supplied some last-minute recommendations for future students:

Do your work ahead of schedule so you can enjoy college life and have time for other activities. Also, when choosing your schedule, I would recommend

either loading your classes up on two days out the week or have big gaps in

between your schedule if you have more than two classes a day.

Greg said he wished he could change his interest as it related toward career choices.

He did not know what he wanted to major in, so he felt a little stressed. However, he

appreciated his schedule and looked forward to selecting a major soon.

Brooklyn

Brooklyn is an African American female from a rural area in North Carolina.

Regarding question one, Brooklyn described herself as an active student within her

school and her community. She was a part of multiple organizations, including her

student advisory team and a student advocacy group that assisted with keeping the

high school open.

Regarding question two, she said she did not feel like her high school offered

college readiness resources and they did not adequately prepare her for college. She

was the first in her immediate family to go to college, but she recalled having the

influence of her grandfather. She stated that her grandfather went to college and she

always wanted to be like him because he was a wise man.

Additionally, her grandfather helped her, stressing the importance of obtaining

a higher education. She received no help in preparing for college until she

participated in the TRIO Summer Bridge program. She smiled as she said the TRIO

program helped her in different ways that her high school did not. She recalled being

introduced to the program by the director after admittance into NCAT. The TRIO

program impacted her life because it helped her enter college, providing additional

resources as she passed through her freshman year. The TRIO program helped with

academics and by giving her advice on things she had going on in her personal life.

She felt her LLC peers were there in times when she needed to talk to someone,

saying the faculty in the TRIO program had always been there for her. The quality

she named as having a great impact on her academic success was her persistence in

wanting to be successful.

Regarding question three, Brooklyn declared attending an HBCU was the best

decision she could have ever made. She admitted it was a culture shock; however, she

would recommend HBCUs to other African American students, as it is a great place

to learn about one's culture. She would not change a thing about the TRIO program.

Her recommendation for future students considering the program is to take advantage

of every opportunity the TRIO program offers.

Caleb

Caleb is an African American male student from an urban area in North

Carolina. Regarding question two, Caleb described himself in high school as an A's

and B's student with occasional Cs. He was a member of the ROTC program;

however, he did not take part in any sports during high school. He acknowledged the

school was okay but not what he would consider great. Additionally, he felt the high

school did not offer many college readiness resources. Although Caleb is the first in

his family to attend college, he was influenced by his junior year history teacher year,

who taught students about the value of college, and how to incorporate good qualities about studying and test taking. Caleb still held on to these ideas.

Regarding question two, he revealed the counselors told students about colleges if the information was important but did not go into detail. Mostly, he said, the counselors reminded students they could go to college or work at the engineering companies in the area, but that was it. Caleb did not take part in the TRIO program during high school, but a friend mentioned something to him about it. The presence of a TRIO program did not have a big impact on him choosing to attend NCAT. He knew he wanted to go to college after high school; it was just the next step. However, due to the lack of preparation from high school, he did not feel ready for college. The greatest number of classes he had in a semester in high school was four, so managing six classes seemed to be a challenge for him.

Regarding question three, Caleb said the TRIO program affected him because he realized he did not have to endure the college process alone. He concluded by saying he would not change anything about the program and recommending future students not to be afraid to ask for help or aid if they need it.

Denita

Denita is an African American female from a rural area in North Carolina. Regarding question one, she described herself as an honor student in high school; however, the school she attended was the only one in her district in a rural, poor town. She was already qualified as a low-income student because of her town. During

high school, she recalled one of the academic challenges she struggled with was math. Although she is a first-generation student, she recalls her mother as being influential in her journey. When Denita was in fifth grade, her mother graduated from college after facing many obstacles, such as multiple pregnancies, divorce, caring for a sick child, and more—in short, her mother persisted. Recalling her upbringing and her mother's journey, Denita said she knows that whatever happens to her, she can persist, too.

Regarding question two, her first introduction to the TRIO program came during her senior year following acceptance into NCAT. She participated in a Jobs for America's Graduate program and the Educational Talent Search (part of the TRIO program). The program did not impact her decision to attend NCAT; however, it made the transition easier because she learned the campus before the rest of the freshmen class arrived and she had already started making friends. She said the TRIO program had lessened the culture shock and provided her with sincere adults who cared about her well-being and connected her to the all the resources she could possibly need to graduate on time.

Regarding question three, she recommended future students build and keep a healthy relationship with the TRIO staff, and "to make the best out of the program because you will only gain something if you put in the effort." Additionally, she would change the fact that TRIO program students could only room with others in the program. She felt the living arrangements hindered participants, because they had a

hard time branching out and meeting new people outside of the program. Overall, she

had a wonderful experience at NCAT and with the TRIO program.

Maxwell

Maxwell is a shy African American male from an urban area in North

Carolina. Regarding question one, he described himself as "lazy" smart. He stated he

often struggled with math in high school. Like some of his peers in the program, he

was the first to go to college in his immediate family, but they had some influence on

his decision to continue his education. His family reminded him it was necessary for

him to attend college, as it was the next step to becoming successful.

Regarding question two, Maxwell was introduced to the TRIO program

during orientation. Because his high school did not offer college readiness resources,

if not for the TRIO and Summer Bridge programs, he felt he would not have been

ready for college. He also identified the program as helping him realize his desire to

achieve his goals and to have a great future and his family. Enrollment in the program

helped him with creating a better understanding of how he should approach his

college career.

In response to question three, his recommendations to future students included

making sure they talk with the TRIO advisors. He would change the small number of

meetings with other TRIO students; however, he would keep the number of trips the

same. Additionally, he expressed unhappiness with the dormitory placement on

campus.

David

David is an African America male from an urban city in North Carolina. Regarding question one, he described himself as an active member at his high school where he maintained at least a 3.0 GPA. He was an active member of the Boy Scouts and other clubs such as student government association, DECCA, and fashion club. Although he was the first in his immediate family to attend college, he had associates who discussed with him the benefits of attending college. He stated more people encouraged him to attend college, but the attendance was based on his volition.

Regarding question two, David explained his high school did not offer any college readiness resources. Like other participants, David learned about the TRIO program upon his acceptance into NCAT, as the email detailed his eligibility in the program, the purpose, and the benefits. He recalled his participation in the summer camp on campus before the start of his first semester, during which the weekly meetings with TRIO were helpful to his adjustment. He felt mature enough to handle college without the college readiness programs. Additionally, he credited his inquisitiveness to learn within his desired career field and ways to intern and connect within the fashion industry as one of the greatest impacts in his academic success and decision to attend NCAT.

Regarding question three, David felt the TRIO program helped him improve as a student as well as a citizen. The program challenged him to improve his time management and keep his focus. David's advice for future students was to use everything made available to them by the TRIO program. He also suggested students

communicate with TRIO staff, saying, the program staff cannot help if students do not ask. Additionally, he suggested students in the program should receive a stipend for their participation.

Chapter 5: Actions, Implementation, and Conclusion

Themes

Each of the themes brought a set of meaningful experiences from the student participants. The interview space allowed individuals to recall shared experiences unknowingly built upon one another. Each student shared similar narratives. Coding the responses helped the researcher make sense of the overarching goal of the study. The themes of the research comprised the most represented and the most used phrases or words offered by participants.

Themes represent the starting point in a study's findings. Contextualizing and making connections between themes help the researcher build a coherent argument supported by data, which is necessary to satisfy immediate audiences and journal reviews (Bazeley, 2009).

The themes defined by the students via the research conducted were engagement, influence, and relationship-building. These overarching themes best characterized participants' ideas, their thoughts, the process of their transition, and the impact the LLC had on their transition process from high school to college.

Discussions

The transition from high school to college can be a stressful time in emerging adulthood. Contributing factors to the degree of stress many college students encounter includes leaving one's home to pursue a degree in a new area, facing the fear of the unexpected, possibly doubting one's abilities to compete with other students, and obtaining financial means to pay for expenses (Brittian et al., 2009).

The results of this structured, qualitative study identified the students' personal experiences and the persistence they required to complete their educational program. This study served as an example of how to conduct research when working with minority students from various racial ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and cultural/religion backgrounds specifically at minority-serving institutions. The information collected from this study provided the TRIO-themed program and the university with information to decrease potential learning gaps and social gaps students may meet as freshmen.

Engagement

All the participants used the one-on-one sessions as a safe place to share information about their experiences, discuss the impacts of the TRIO program, and offered added comments for future students of the LLC. Although each of the interviews took place at different times, the students shared often similar experiences about what type of student they were. Their academic areas of challenge were similar. All students felt they had been very active participants throughout high school, taking part in various clubs such as student government associations, DECA, fashion clubs,

gaming clubs, and athletics, among others. Some were even social action change

agents outside of the classroom.

This major theme relating to engagement appeared in some form by most of

the participants as they discussed their activities during their high school career. All

participants were active members within their churches, their communities, and their

schools. They felt their active participation and membership helped set the foundation

for their growth and improvement and provided them some skills related to college

readiness, even if their high school may have not offered much.

Influence/Motivation

Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) said:

Although ethnic minority students are more likely than other students to be the

first in their family to attend college, most research has focused on first-

generation college students as a group, without focusing specifically on only

those who are ethnic minorities. (p. 223).

Two categories are determinants for classifying students' motivation to attend

college. Students may have individual motivation, or they may be motivated by their

family members to attend college. As a result, this theme received mixed answers.

Most of the participants recalled being influenced by a family member other than

their parents who had attended college. As noted by Dennis et al., "students from

cultural backgrounds emphasizing family interdependence may be expected to fulfill

obligations to the family that conflict with college responsibilities" (p. 223).

Relationship Building

When cohort learning is approached holistically, individuals are highly

motivated to learn (Fenning, 2004, p. 4). Participants engaged in the TRIO learning

community reported the relationships formed with their peers and administration team

were the major benefit for taking part in the LLC. All students spoke about the

connections they made with the counselors and director. Additionally, they viewed

their peers as being family away from family. The relationships they built through the

program affected them personally, providing a great resource in their adjustment to

campus life. Marienau and Reed (2008) stated, "The values, behaviors, and images

that individuals learn within their primary group influence whether and how they

make meaning from experience outside of the familiar (p. 65).

Comparison and Contrast

Research have suggested students who have the opportunity to develop and

build their personal, social, and academic skills within a pedagogical community may

be more advanced in their ability to foster new communities within their professional

careers. Structures such as the residential LLCs help promote the ability of the

participants to learn how to balance their family and career responsibilities (Fenning,

2004, p. 3).

The TRIO LLC helps students combat acculturative stress, proposed as one

explanation for low academic retention rates among African American students

(Brittian et al., 2009). The themes were consistent with Shiven and Olcott (2001),

who suggested students who could develop and build their personal, social, and

academic skills within a pedagogical community may be more advanced in their

ability to foster new communities within their professional careers.

This residential-based Living Learning concept implemented by NCAT was

consistent with the belief that not all education happens in the classroom. In

residence-based program models, students are enrolled in specific courses together

and reside in a dedicated living space with the implemented curriculum, which allows

ample opportunities for extracurricular activities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

According to Lee (1999), the accessibility to a higher education institution represents

a gateway to economic empowerment for thousands of students who enter the

nation's postsecondary institutions each year. Students also agreed with past findings

indicating the intentionally interactive small group environments assist in the

establishment of academic and social support networks inside and outside the

classroom (Collision, 1993). Due the closeness and intentionally interactive small

group environments, students feel part of a community that has become a second

family to them.

However, the students rarely took leadership roles regarding their learning in

which they have opportunities to reflect, become critical thinkers who can frame

questions and develop a deep understanding of the issues they investigate, and feel

equipped to share their learning with others within the community (Bielaczyc &

Collins, 1999). The participants did not mention any leadership positions or other

campus activities in which they may have been involved. Many times, teachers'

expectations for and visions of student impacts and outcomes lower student

expectations and create inequitable access to high-quality learning opportunities (Conklin et al., 2010); however, this appears untrue for students of color and those in poverty.

Further Discussion

Student engagement is defined as the level of passion and interest students show in their learning experiences (McDougal, Cox, Dorley, & Wodjae, 2018, p. 194). According to Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) "student engagement is both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practice" (p. 542). According to researchers, socioeconomics conditions are at the root of the achievement gap. The societal efforts to overcome the ill effects of prejudice and discrimination for African Americans have not been effective enough and inequities continue to exist in almost every aspect of life, including education (Bowman et al., 2018). The economic and social conditions, especially for minorities, are evident in the interviews conducted with student participants in the TRIO Living Learning program. Understanding and analyzing the collegiate racial climate is an important part of examining college access, persistence, graduation, and transfer to and through graduate and professional school for African American students (Solorzano al., p. 63).

Conducting further research may help understand and analyze the collegiate racial climate, including college preparedness for minority students in high school and further examination of college access for low-income students. Also suggested is

a review of college access and college preparedness for students from rural

populations.

Conclusion

This study answered the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of an LLC participant of an LLC program?

RQ2: What is the impact of an LLC on a first-generation, minority student

attending a minority-serving institution?

Capturing the experiences shared by the student participants in structured

interviews revealed that the LLC program aided students in their transition from high

school to college. The validity and reliability of the research lies in its repeatability

with other LLC programs due to no interference with any of the other variables.

Additionally, the choice of the students taken part in the research study was

predetermined by the guidelines set forth by the federal government. In conclusion,

the LLC affected the students as they progressed through their first year at a HBCU

by offering mental support, professional development opportunities, and enrollment

and housing aid.

Often, narratives told through research studies do not represent students of

color that are specifically enrolled at minority-serving institutions. Therefore,

conflicting information may exist when discussing minorities attending higher

education institutions. Often, the results reflect minorities attending PWIs and not

include minorities attending HBCUs. Additionally, many studies often emphasized

learning environments with racially majority serving staff and faculty often making for an uncomfortable learning environment due to the inability to relate to minority students. However, what happens if students attended an institution more empathetic to their socioeconomic status? What if that institution supplied one-on-one aid, created a culture conducive to the students learning needs, and was learner centered? This study captured students' experiences including the struggles, socioeconomic status, and racial differences.

In conclusion, Educational leaders of HBCUs are pleased with the increase of students' pursuing their education at Historically Black Colleges and want to further sustain their excellence by providing curricula that prepare students for social, political, and economic platforms within society; by offering competitive salaries for faculty, and advancing opportunities for students through implementation of socio-political and socio-economic curricula (Cantey et al., 2013, p. 148). The research study results proved that residential LLCs were beneficial to the lives of first-generation, minority students that are attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBUC's).

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Appendix A

Interview Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is D. Monique Pearce-Brady and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Morehead State University in the Department of Foundational Studies and Graduate Education. I am requesting your assistance with a research project entitled "Understanding the perspectives of first-year African American students and the impact of a TRIO living-learning community at a Historically Black College and University." The research is expected to detail perceptions of students that are involved in a TRIO themed living-learning community and the resources which have been provided during the transitional period from high school to college.

In order to participate students must be
- 18 years of age or older.
- Be willing to participate in a 45-minute face-to-face/phone interview/video chat interview that will be recorded.
- Participating in this study is voluntary and not mandatory. If you do not wish to take part in the face-to-face interview, you may withdraw your participation at any time.
- Participating in this study does not have any direct benefits, however, you may receive an indirect benefit of valuable information and resources to help during your freshman year.
- The answers provided will be kept confidential and all research subject responses rather audiotaped or written will be kept in a locked database.
- All responses recorded or written will be deleted six months after the completion of the project.

Please indicate your consent to participate by signing the statement below:

I understand the information expressed above. I consent to participate in an interview for this research project and to allow my interview data to be used in a research report. I understand that my responses will remain confidential. My name will not be used in any reporting or publication of research data. I also agree to allow my responses to be audio-recorded. I understand that participating in the study is voluntary and I may withdraw my participation at any time.

Participant printed name:

_____

_____   _____

Participant signature   **Date**

Participant Phone

Number:_____

Participant Email

Address:_____

Appendix B

Consent to Participate

February 2, 2019

 Dear Participant,

I am inviting you to participate in an interview for a research project entitled "Understanding the perspectives of first-year African American TRIO students and the impact of a living-learning community at a Historically Black College and University". Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

The purpose of this study is to gather perceptions of first-generation freshmen students regarding experiences and the impact of a living-learning community in their transitional process from high school to college.

The data gathered will be used solely to complete the research stated above. The result from the research is expected to provide information regarding students' developmental process and their transition process.

If you would like to take part, you will be asked to participate in a phone or zoom interview. The interview will be approximately about 45 minutes, dependent upon the information you would like to share.

If you are willing to take part in this study complete the bottom portion of this form. You will then be contacted for scheduling information.

I look forward to speaking with you about your experiences.

Sincerely,

Dorothy M. Pearce-Brady, Doctoral Candidate

Morehead State University

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact the researcher: Dorothy M. Pearce-Brady, dpearcebrady@moreheadstate.edu, 336-207-2665 and MSU Institutional Review Board office 606-783-2278 for any issues regarding participating in this study.

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate

Date: [Insert Date of Approval]

Participant,

I am inviting you to participate in an interview for a research project entitled "Understanding the perspectives of first-year African American TRIO students and the impact of a living-learning community at a Historically Black College and University". Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

The purpose of this study is to gather perceptions of first-generation freshmen students regarding what they have experienced and the impacts that a living-learning community has had on their transitional process from high school to college.

The data gathered will be used solely to complete the research above and the research is expected to provide information regarding students' developmental process and how it has assisted you as a first-generation college student.

If you would like to participate, you will be interviewed at a place you select. The interview will be approximately about 45 minutes.

Please reply to this email to indicate if you are willing to participate. You will then be contacted with further information.

I look forward to speaking with you about your experiences.

Sincerely,

Dorothy M. Pearce-Brady, Doctoral Candidate
Morehead State University

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact the researcher: Dorothy M. Pearce-Brady, dpearcebrady@moreheadstate.edu, 336-207-2665 and MSU Institutional Review Board office 606-783-2278 for any issues regarding participating in this study.

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Which experiences do first-generation college students attending a Historically Black College and University perceive to impact their academic success?

- Describe what kind of student you were during high school. Please include any community, your school, or any special groups/activities that were a part of your academics during that time.
- Can you recall any academic challenges you may have encountered during high school?
- Has anyone in your family or extended family ever attended college? How have they shaped your values regarding college?
- What educational experience would you identify as having the greatest impact on your academic success to this point?

What experiences do first-generation college students attending a Historically Black College and University perceive to impact their non-academic success?

- How were you introduced to the TRIO program?
- How would you describe the college readiness resources that were provided throughout high school and so far during your freshmen year? (College Prep courses, first-year experience programs, or using student support services)
- How has the TRIO program (Upward Bound, etc.) influenced your decision to attend a North Carolina A&T State University? Do you think that your prepared to attend college? Please explain.

What personal factors do first-generation students attending a Historically Black College and University perceive impacts a successful transition from high school to college?

- Please describe how you would recommend future students to utilize the program moving forth?
- Please describe, if you had to change anything, what would you change and what would you keep the same?
- Please use this time to describe how being enrolled in the TRIO program has impacted your life now and how can you use this information/resources in the future.

Appendix E

Interview Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Dorothy M. Pearce-Brady and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Morehead State University in the Department of Foundational Studies and Graduate Education. I am requesting your assistance with a research project entitled "Understanding the perspectives of first-year African American students and the impact of a TRIO living-learning community at a Historically Black College and University." The research is expected to illuminate perceptions of students that are involved in a TRIO themed living-learning community and the resources which has been provided to students during the transition from high school to college.

- In order to participate students must be 18 years of age or older.
- Be willing to participate in a 45-minute face-to-face interview that will be recorded.
- Participating in this study is voluntary and not mandatory. If you do not wish to take part in the face-to-face interview, you may withdraw your participation at any time.
- Participating in this study does not have any direct benefits, however, you may receive an indirect benefit of valuable information and resources to help during your freshmen year.
- The answers provided will be kept confidential and all research subject responses rather audiotaped or written will be kept in a locked database.
- All responses recorded or written will be deleted six months after the completion of the project.

Please indicate your consent to participate by signing the statement below:

I understand the information expressed above. I consent to participate in an interview for this research project and to allow my interview data to be used in a research report. I understand that my responses will remain confidential. My name will not be used in any reporting or publication of research data. I also agree to allow my responses to be audio-recorded. I understand that participating is voluntary, which I may withdrawal my participation at any time.

Participant printed name:
_____

_____   _____

Participant signature   Date

VITA

DOROTHY M. PEARCE-BRADY

EDUCATION

June, 2010	Bachelor of Science North Carolina Central University Durham, North Carolina	
December, 2011	Master of Science North Carolina A&T State University Greensboro, North Carolina	
Pending	Doctor of Education Morehead State University Morehead, Kentucky	

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

2017-Present	4-H Youth Development Agent North Carolina A&T State University Greensboro, North Carolina	
2012-2017	Family and Consumer Science Agent Kentucky State University Frankfort, Kentucky	