"THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING": AN EXPLORATION OF COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH, RACIALIZED COLLEGE EXPERIENCES, AND GRADUATE DEGREE ASPIRATIONS AMONG BLACK STUDENTS

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education

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by

Danielle A. Moore-Lewis, M.Ed.

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation aimed to investigate the intersectional experiences that influence Black students' graduate degree aspirations. For students from marginalized backgrounds, a college degree can be a facilitator of increased human capital and upward social mobility (Becker, 1993; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Smart & Pascarella, 1986). However, with the rising cost of a college education coupled with a decline in the return on investment of traditional four-year degrees (Emmons, Kent & Ricketts, 2019), greater demands are being placed on college students to pursue degrees beyond the undergraduate level. Recent research on annual earnings by educational attainment shows that the median earnings for those with a master's degree were 20% higher than the earnings of those with a bachelor's degree as their highest level of attainment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Studies show that marginalized students, including first-generation (Carlton, 2015; Gardner & Holley, 2011) and racial and ethnically marginalized students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) are less likely to pursue graduate degrees than their peers, thus diminishing their ability to capitalize on their investment in human capital through higher education.

Though studied extensively, much of the current literature on marginalized student experiences in higher education is presented through a deficit framing, where no known study has thoroughly investigated the influence of cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions on graduate degree aspirations. Guided by Carter's (2002) theoretical model of college students' degree aspirations and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, this study's intersectional approach to investigating Black college student experiences used a convergent parallel mixed methods design to investigate how context shapes perceptions of their

campus environment and how background characteristics, cultural wealth, and racialized emotions influence their graduate degree aspirations.

Through the convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings, the results from this mixed-methods study suggest that 1) Black students' community cultural wealth (i.e., social, familial, resistance, and navigational capital) when drawn upon and successfully exchanged within their campus environments, positively influences graduate degree aspirations, 2) Black students' racialized campus experiences and emotions, both positive in the form of support from faculty and other social networks, and negative in the form of experiences with racism and microaggressive behavior, influence Black student's desires to pursue education beyond the baccalaureate, and 3) Black students' experiences and expressions of Black joy served as a coping mechanism, a significant source resilience amidst adversity, and fostered academic persistence evidenced through its influence on Black students' aspirations for graduate study.

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, ("This is Only The Beginning: An Exploration of Community Cultural Wealth, Racialized College Experiences, and Graduate Degree Aspirations Among Black Students") has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all the little island girls with big dreams who make the difficult decision to leave their ancestral homes and source of cultural wealth in pursuit of their aspirations. Hold on to your dreams and let them fuel you, take up space in places not designed for you, and in moments of uncertainty, remember that you are never alone. You stand on the shoulders of all of us who came before you, and we are so proud of you.

This is only the beginning.

With All My Love,
Danielle

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Table of Contents

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

List of Tables

List of Figures

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Access to higher education for historically marginalized students has significantly increased over the past few decades (Brubacher, 2017; Renn & Reason, 2012; Strayhorn, 2006), and as such, much of today's undergraduate population is comprised of students who are the first in their families to attend college (RTI International, 2019; Saenz, 2007). First-generation college students, being students from families in which neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree (Soria & Stebleton, 2012), represent 56% of the undergraduate population in the United States (RTI International, 2019). However, despite increased access and representation, researchers have found that compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation college students are more likely to leave college in their first year (Pratt et al., 2019) and have significantly lower graduation rates (Cataldi et al., 2018).

For students from marginalized backgrounds, a college degree can be a ticket to increased human capital and upward social mobility (Becker, 1993; Hill et al., 2015; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Smart & Pascarella, 1986). Notably, a recent report issued by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce outlined that by 2031, 42% of jobs in the United States will require at least a bachelor's degree, a stark 23% increase since 1983 (Carnevale et al., 2023). However, with the rising cost of a college education coupled with a decline in the return on investment of traditional four-year degrees (Emmons et al., 2019), greater demands are being placed on college students to pursue degrees beyond the undergraduate level. Discrepancies at the undergraduate level are exacerbated when considering access to graduate degrees as studies show that first-generation (Carlton, 2015; Gardner & Holley, 2011, RTI International, 2021), and racial and ethnically marginalized students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) are less likely to pursue graduate degrees than their peers. Thus, with greater demands

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being placed on college students to pursue degrees beyond the undergraduate level, such findings raise significant concerns related to inequality in graduate school access and marginalized students' ability to capitalize on their investment in human capital through higher education, which has serious implications for social inequality.

Historically, higher education in the United States was designed by and reserved for white men; thus, to be successful in college, Black students in particular, are often required to assimilate into vastly unfamiliar and often hostile environments (Cureton, 2003; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2023). The hostility present on today's college campuses can be traced to the early opposition of the Black Liberation movements for access to education, where, by insisting on access to education as a fundamental right, the Black community was met with hostile and at times violent opposition to their aspirations for education (Biondi, 2012).

Today, gaining college admission is just the beginning for Black students, as research indicates that they graduate with bachelor's and advanced degrees at lower rates than their white peers (Carter, 2001; Okahana et al., 2020). In addition to fulfilling their academic requirements, Black students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) with histories of racial exclusion (histories of enslavement, segregation, etc. (Garibay et al., 2020; Mustaffa, 2017; Tewksbury, 1965) must also contend with what it means to exist in spaces that have historically excluded them and exploited their ancestors. As a result, Black students attending PWIs often experience hostile racial campus climates which can lead to feelings of isolation and separation from the general student body (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Griffin et al., 2012; D. Love, 2009; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2023).

Feelings of isolation and a low sense of belonging have become common elements of the Black student experience (Griffin et al., 2012; Solorzano et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2018), which is

particularly concerning as research indicates that a strong sense of belonging and feeling part of the college community are crucial to college student motivation, commitment, and success while actively working toward degree attainment (Hausmann et al., 2009; O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). However, the way students experience belonging varies greatly across racial, ethnic, and generational groups (Duran et al., 2020; Hausmann et al., 2009; Soria & Stebleton, 2012), and research indicates that many institutions fail to create environments that honor diverse student backgrounds, thus impacting their overall sense of belonging and academic success (Museus et al., 2017).

Black students attending PWIs with histories of racial exclusion and discrimination have a uniquely racialized experience that greatly influences their sense of belonging and connection to their campus community (Strayhorn, 2018), and the way they navigate their learning environments (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). However, though sense of belonging has extensively been studied, a critique of current belonging research on marginalized students is its deficit framing, where students' experiences of belonging are viewed in relation to their negative racialized emotions and experiences on campus, such as sadness, fear, marginalization, and exclusion (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). This framing, as argued by Tichavakunda (2022), ignores the full spectrum of racialized emotions experienced by Black students and their influence on student outcomes. Tichavakunda (2022) writes that "while enslaved people's lives were shaped by slavery, their lives were not *reducible* to a response to slavery" (p. 424), and so too are the experiences of Black students on hostile campuses.

Solely investigating Black students' experiences on PWIs through a deficit lens, rather than their capacity for joy and resilience, reduces our ability to understand the impact of their positive experiences and emotions on student outcomes. Given this need to expand our

understanding of intersectional Black student experiences, coupled with data to support that marginalized students are enrolling in graduate school at lower rates than their peers (Okahana et al., 2020), more research is needed to explore positive racialized experiences and emotions like joy in relation to Blackness and its impact on graduate degree aspirations.

Statement of the Problem

Early research on educational aspirations shows that high educational aspirations have been linked to both undergraduate and graduate degree attainment (Astin, 1977; Heath, 1992) and recent work on marginalized students' educational aspirations further confirms these findings (Li et al., 2022). However, much of the research examining students' academic and social outcomes broadly, and degree aspirations and graduate education more specifically, utilizes secondary student datasets and employs quantitative research methodologies (e.g. Carlton, 2015; Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2021; Eagan et al., 2013; Garg et al., 2002; Glass, 2023, 2023; Hanson et al., 2016; Heath, 1992; Ishitani, 2006, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013; Li et al., 2022; Lorah & Miller, 2023; McCall, 2007; G. M. P. McCarron, 2012; G. P. McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Museus & Chang, 2021; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pratt et al., 2019; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Strayhorn, 2006; Tate et al., 2015). Though studied extensively, relying solely on quantitative data does not allow us to capture the nuanced and intersectional lived experiences of Black students, which has resulted in methodological gaps in the literature.

As outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2017), the purpose of quantitative methodologies is theory testing while qualitative research is geared toward "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 41). To this end, there have been few qualitative studies that have examined the navigational experiences and outcomes of diverse student populations (Clayton et al., 2023; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Johnson, 2013;

Lee, 2011; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Robinson, 2014; Roksa et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2022), and even fewer that have utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a more in-depth understanding of the marginalized student experience. As Tichavakunda (2022) so poetically states, "To what extent do Black lives matter in educational and sociological research if Black people are not narrating how they experience or overcome oppression?" (p. 436). With evidence to support significant disparities in marginalized students' degree aspirations and attainment (Carter, 2001; Cataldi et al., 2018; Li et al., 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; Pratt et al., 2019), there is much need for research that utilizes mixed-methods to thoroughly explore the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending PWIs.

Finally, and of most personal significance, is this study's goal of not only investigating barriers to graduate school entry but also highlighting the assets Black students bring with them and continue to develop while on their college campuses – including black joy. As articulated by Tichavakunda (2022), "Black joy, while explicitly named and highlighted in more aspects of Black life and popular culture, is sorely absent in research on Black student life" (p. 421). Scholars have explored how Black students attending PWIs find community with other Black students (Gilkes Borr, 2019) and practice self-care (Mustaffa, 2017) as a means of creating affirming counter spaces amidst hostile climates. Given these assertions, this study aims to add to that body of work by investigating how Black joy, among other forms of positive racialized experiences and cultural assets, influence Black students' desire to pursue graduate education. In doing so, this study also aims to add to a formalized definition of Black joy to further support scholars and practitioners in their work on studying and supporting Black students' experiences and outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

Although marginalized students have increasingly gained access to higher education, without a comprehensive understanding of their unique experiences, coupled with adequate support, these students may never be able to achieve their ultimate goals (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2023). Guided by Carter's (2002) theoretical model of college students' degree aspirations and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, this study aims to explore how perceptions of and experiences with the college environment foster and/or hinder Black students' graduate degree aspirations. To best capture the nuance of the Black student experience, I employ a convergent parallel mixed methodology approach to answering the following research questions:

Quantitative Phase:

1. What forms of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions are associated with the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending PWIs?

Qualitative Phase:

2. How do Black students attending PWIs describe the impact of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions on their undergraduate experience and graduate degree aspirations?

Definition of Key Terms

The following section provides definitions of the key terms used throughout the present study. Note that the usage of these terms in existing literature may vary due to numerous factors, and as such, the definitions outlined below reflect how they've been operationalized for the present study.

First-generation Students: The term "first-generation student" has a few distinct definitions from existing literature. Davis (2010) observes that prior studies have defined first-generation college students in three ways: 1) Students whose parent(s) have *no* college experience, 2) Students whose parent(s) have *some* college experience but *no* college degree, and 3) Students with *one parent* who has earned a college degree. For the present study, and following a significant portion of the higher education community, first-generation college students are defined as students for which neither parent or guardian has earned a baccalaureate degree (Ishitani, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Continuing-generation Students: In contrast with the operationalized definition of first-generation students above, continuing-generation college students refer to students in which at least one parent or legal guardian has earned a baccalaureate degree.

Social Capital: Based on Bourdieu's (2011) original theorizing on the unique forms of capital, social capital in higher education literature has been understood to be the resources rooted in social networks (Hill et al., 2015), and more specifically, social capital is understood to be "productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (Coleman, 1988, p. 98). Notably, scholars have made explicit the distinction between social capital and social support by outlining that while social support centers on the "encouragement and care" from one's social network, social capital instead refers to the "information and resources embedded in the social network" (Hill et al., 2015, p. 321).

Cultural Capital: As theorized by Bourdieu (2011), cultural capital refers to the accrual of certain forms of cultural knowledge and abilities acquired through family and/or formal education. In addition to cultural capital being possessed by and inherited through systems of privilege, scholars argue that these skills and knowledge are also deeply valued by the dominant

groups in society, which greatly contributes to their maintenance of power. Specifically, Yosso (2005) argues asserts that "cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society" (p. 76). Yosso (2005) challenges this traditional interpretation of cultural capital by moving away from a deficit view of communities of color's cultural knowledge and abilities to focus on "the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p. 69).

Campus Racial Climate: Campus racial climate has been defined as the general racial environment of, and collective attitude towards, a college campus (Hurtado et al., 2008; Solorzano et al., 2000). In other words, the racial climate of a college campus refers to the overall perceptions of the college campus as it relates to race and diversity. With this definition in mind, a positive campus racial climate would include diverse populations being represented and supported on campus and a negative campus racial climate would be one in which minoritized populations do not feel supported and fairly represented (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Degree Aspirations: As noted by Carter (2001), the term educational aspirations has been operationalized in many ways throughout the higher education community resulting in little uniformity in how terms like aspirations and expectations are used to study educational outcomes. Early research on educational aspirations posits that aspirations are "goal[s] that a person would like to achieve" while expectations refer to "goals that one intends or expects to attain" (Berman & Haug, 1975, p. 166). Given these operationalized definitions and through her extensive exploration of the existing literature on educational aspirations, (Carter, 2001) asserts that researchers interested in studying degree aspirations and expectations are interested in

investigating "the highest degree students want to attain; the highest degree students realistically expect to attain; the degree to which students intend or are determined to attain their degree goals; and finally, the obstacles that may interfere with students realizing their goals" (p. 13). For the present student, the educational outcome of interest is graduate degree aspirations, and as such, degree aspirations refer to the highest level of education a student expects to attain.

Sense of Belonging: Sense of belonging has been broadly defined as an individual's identification and affiliation with their community (Hausmann et al., 2009). More specifically in terms of the college student experience, and for the present study, a sense of belonging refers to "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling care about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 4).

Black Joy: As an extension of research into Black students' belongingness (Strayhorn, 2018), Tichavakunda (2022) contends that "if students are to have positive campus experiences—which are illustrated by metrics such as belongingness and engagement—then students must experience positive emotions such as joy" (p. 423). Grounded in Bonilla-Silva's (2019) theory of racialized emotions, Tichavakunda (2022) views Black joy as an "emotion engendered by a racialized society" (p. 423), and Lewis-Giggetts (2022) speaks of Black joy as a form of resistance, resilience, and restoration, as such, this study operationalizes Black joy as a positive racialized emotion experienced by Black students that captures their experiences of joy/happiness, fun/pleasure, fulfillment, and feeling loved/cared for.

Significance of the Study

Despite the increasing access to higher education for marginalized students, achieving their desired outcomes may remain elusive without adequate support informed by a thorough understanding of how their unique identities impact their college experiences. As earlier outlined, the higher education community has spent much time exploring the barriers Black students face when navigating their academic environments which has resulted in significant changes to the way we support and empower vulnerable populations – myself included. However, though there is much to gain from understanding the ways in which academic environments threaten Black students' experiences and their development, I argue that there is even more to gain from understanding their resilience, sources of community cultural wealth, and positive racialized experiences. For is there no greater sign of resilience than the ability to find joy and community while surrounded by vestiges of slavery's past and the role it's played in the proliferation of anti-Black racism of the present?

As Betina Love explains "…in Black history and contemporary times of escalating violence against our bodies, minds, and spirits worldwide, Blacks in diaspora and on the continent are still here." (Love, 2019, p. 119). Though evidence demonstrates that Black students are enrolling in graduate programs at significantly lower rates than their peers, Black students are still here. Despite the barriers, *we are still here*. Despite the threats, *we are still here*, and somehow, despite even our own fears and doubts, *we are still here* for "finding joy in the midst of pain and trauma is the fight to be fully human" (Love, 2019, p. 119). So, it is my hope that through an exploration of Black students' community cultural wealth and positive racialized emotions, I may contribute to the development of best practices for marginalized student support and equip higher education researchers and practitioners with a framework for better

understanding and supporting Black students' academic and social pursuits that consider all

aspects of their nuanced and dynamic identity.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin this review of the relevant literature on students' degree aspirations by providing a historical overview of higher education in the United States to ground this study into the larger argument for education being a cornerstone of the Black Liberation Movement. Through a deep dive into both the historical and contemporary experiences of Black students, I aim to demonstrate the role of education in the Black community, their overlooked and undervalued sources of cultural capital, and their influence on Black students' graduate degree aspirations.

American Higher Education: An Evolving Landscape

Higher education in the United States as we know it today has been through a myriad of changes throughout history. Notable changes include the role of education in American society, who higher education was designed for, what subjects were included in the curriculum, and the fight for access to education for minoritized communities. Today, it is not uncommon for topics such as diversity, inclusion, and belonging to take the forefront of higher education discourse, as the demographic of student populations has evolved. However, when the colonial colleges were founded in the 18th century, the goal of formal higher education was to provide the church with an educated clergy and society with educated leaders . In doing so, the colonial college model excluded those whom society did not deem necessary to educate, such as women, the indigenous, and the enslaved.

Higher Education in Transition (Brubacher, 2017) walks readers through the history of higher education in the United States from its earliest inception in the colonial era. Traditionally, American education was developed after European models of higher education. Brubacher (2017) explained that:

> In each part of the New World, the European settlers sought to create as close an approximation as they could to the culture with which they had been familiar back home…

In achieving this aim of the transmission and preservation of intellectual culture, higher education was the most valuable tool that lay at hand (p. 5).

As a result, the American education system was designed to assimilate Americans into European culture by way of formal education.

Along with transferring European culture, the colonial colleges in the United States were established to train and prepare young men to be leaders in the church and local society, as a result, religion, namely Christianity, played a significant role in the formation of colonial colleges. According to Brubacher (2017) "...the desire of important religious denominations (such as the Anglican and Calvinist) for literate, college-trained clergy was probably the most important single factor explaining the founding of the colonial colleges" (p. 6). In addition to educating future clergy members, colonial colleges were designed to build an enlightened civil society, where graduates were positioned to be leaders in their communities.

Beyond the purpose of education outlined by the European-fashioned colonial college, America's earliest colleges also had a desired student population in mind. As outlined in Lucas (2016), "At Harvard between 1677 and 1703, for instance, surviving records attest to the fact that sons of clergymen compromised a majority of those admitted, followed by the sons of merchants, shopkeepers, master mariners, magistrates and attorneys, militia officers, and wealthy farmers" (p. 108). Lucas (2016) went on to outline that amongst the children of clergymen and attorneys, colonial institutions also enrolled lower-class students as well.

Though small in number, few sons of servants and farmers were also granted admission to institutions like Harvard. However, though there may have been limited variation in the student population with regard to socioeconomic status and class, there was no variation based on race and gender. The colonial colleges solely enrolled white men, as they were those whom society deemed fit for future leadership, and thus, education. Lucas (2016) explained that

"Throughout the South, it was a statutory crime in most states to teach even the rudiments of reading and writing to anyone of African ancestry" (p. 122). In the colonial era, African Americans were excluded from institutions of formal education, and as education was evidenced to be the key to upward social mobility, minoritized groups fought for their access.

Education as Freedom and Aspirational Resistance: Black Students' Fight for Higher Education

Drewry and Doermann's (2012) *Stand and Prosper* highlights the social and political contexts surrounding Black Americans' aspirations for and access to higher education. As with other groups outside of the dominant culture, the fight for access to education was not without immense struggle. Education in its earliest form was designed by and thus for white Christian men, leaving behind minoritized groups such as women, the indigenous, and the enslaved. For both dominant as well as marginalized groups, access to education was seen as a means toward upward social mobility, respect, and agency, however, for the newly freed men and women, access to higher education became about comprehensive freedom, representation, and survival.

For Black Americans post-enslavement, the benefit of higher education went far beyond content mastery and was seen as "an important step towards equality of opportunity and by many as an obligation to the progress of the race" (Drewry & Doermann, 2012, p. 5). During the reconstruction period from 1865 to 1867, freedmen recognized that the difference between themselves and their former enslavers was not merely color but knowledge and viewed education as a safeguard against their return to slavery (Myers, 1971). To the newly freed men and women, freedom went beyond their departure from plantations and extended to their desire to read and write, something we may all take for granted over a century. To this end, access to education was not just an element of freedom, but rather, it *was* freedom (Allen et al., 2000), and freedmen and women advocated for this freedom through three main approaches: legal battles against

segregation (Brown, 2004; Byrd-Chichester, 2000; Garibaldi, 1997; Heilig et al., 2010; Yosso et al., 2004), institutional development (Brown, 2004; Byrd-Chichester, 2000; Evans, 2016), and engaging in grassroots activism (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Mustaffa, 2017; Shabazz, 2004; Sulé, 2013).

In Brown's (2004) historical analysis of collegiate desegregation efforts, he highlights the role of legal history in dismantling segregated systems of higher education, noting that postsecondary legal cases set the framework for the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision. Education historians highlight that though legal challenges were a consistent strategy in Black Americans' advocacy for higher education access through desegregation, these legal challenges were often met with hostile receptions in both the federal courts and the highly contentious court of public opinion (Byrd-Chichester, 2000). For though no longer enslaved, Black Americans still existed in a very racialized and often hostile society, which fueled great opposition to their right to education. In the opening scene of the documentary *Fighting Back (1957–1962),* Senator James Eastland of Mississippi shared the following sentiments "All the people of the South are in favor of segregation, and Supreme Court or no Supreme Court, we are going to maintain segregated schools down in Dixie" (00:01:38-01:50). These sentiments were shortly followed by those of Sheriff Mel Bailey of Birmingham, Alabama

> It wasn't funny then; it's still not funny. But suddenly, we have the 14th Amendment that took 100 years, brought on by the Civil War, suddenly must be complied with: equal treatment under the law. And that was a resistance. They are not going to get equal treatment. What do you mean? Go to school with my little darlin'? That is why resistance! (00:01:51-02:22).

These were the sentiments of the South in 1954 after the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that under the 14th Amendment, segregated schools were unconstitutional.

From the public to elected officials and law enforcement officers, the overwhelming majority of the South was morally opposed to desegregation as they believed it infringed upon their heritage and Southern tradition. After the Supreme Court ruling, years of outright opposition to desegregation and in many cases, violence followed. Despite this hostility and direct opposition to their education, Black Americans remained resolute in their belief that "education [was] crucial to their freedom and progress, and vital to their sense of who they were." (Drewry & Doermann, 2012, p. 3). With this in mind, it quickly became a priority for Black students to create spaces in which their identities, struggles, and safety were valued and validated, which gave rise to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Rather than simply being tolerated and given permission to learn amongst white students, Black students craved the kind of fellowship and validation found amongst themselves, leading to the creation and support of HBCUs which emerged as a significant form of institutional activism. Brown (2004) noted that the proliferation of Black-founded, operated, and populated institutions in the aftermath of the Civil War led to over 200 such institutions being established between 1865 and 1890. The fight for access to higher education for Black Americans began with enrollment into institutions of higher education but continued with demanding equal representation in those spaces. Black students not only wanted to learn alongside their peers, but they also demanded representation at the highest levels of their institutions. During a time when "most of their presidents were White and white church groups determined college policy" (Drewry & Doermann, 2012, p. 8), Black students advocated for change to create "'black colleges' in a fuller sense" (Drewry & Doermann, 2012, p. 8). In doing so, Black students prioritized efforts aimed at creating policies, curricula, and leadership that reflected and understood the Black experience in the United States.

What made the Black Liberation Movement for education so unique was that not only did policy need to change, but so did social perception. Black Americans were fighting to be seen as more than property, thus deserving basic human rights such as the right to education. As education was seen as a key to power, agency, and success, white southerners were not just opposed to Black Americans being educated but were also opposed to their access to power. Social capital in the hands of Black Americans was seen as dangerous as it greatly threatened the status quo, which led to individual and collective resistance strategies in the Black Liberation movements for education. Shabazz (2004) examined the struggle for access and equity in higher education in Texas, noting the interplay between legal challenges, grassroots organizing, intellectual activism, and policy advocacy in the fight for access and equity in higher education. The Black Liberation movements for education in Texas played a pivotal role in the challenge to Jim Crow era education laws nationwide, as movements such as the creation of the Texas University Movement in the 1800s to lobby for equal access to graduate and professional education for Black Americans, laid the groundwork for nationwide desegregation efforts (Shabazz, 2004).

Together, the above strategies, which have evolved from the post-Civil War institution building and Jim Crow legal battles to the Civil Rights era and current debates over affirmative action, illustrate the multifaceted pursuit of the Black liberation for education movement in the United States. Black Americans "looked to education as the great indispensable foundation of democracy" (Drewry & Doermann, 2012, p. 6), a democracy they deemed worth fighting for and what I argue to be evidence of multi-generational aspirational capital in the Black community. For what better example for the ability to hold on to hope when faced with immediate and systemic barriers than a movement built on the unwavering belief in education as a vehicle for

freedom, progress, and self-determination? Despite enduring centuries of exclusion, segregation, and systemic underfunding, Black communities have continually invested in educational institutions, advocacy, and policy reforms that challenge oppressive structures. This persistence reflects a deep-rooted commitment to not only individual advancement but also collective uplift, embodying Yosso's (2005) concept of aspirational capital.

"Mother, This Is Something That I Just Have to Do"

Before I detail the existing research on Black students' degree aspirations, I would like to open with a story of graduate aspirations that I believe showcases the impact of cultural capital in the aspirations of Black students who aided in the movement for resistance, liberation, and freedom through education. This is the story of Mary Frances Early, who in 1962, became the first African American to graduate from the University of Georgia.

When we think about access to education for marginalized communities, a few names immediately come to mind. Ernest Green, Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls of the Little Rock Nine, Ruby Bridges of Mississippi, and Mary Frances Early of Georgia. Their stories have been told nationwide and their efforts have paved the way for Black students to aspire to opportunities their ancestors could only dream of. However, though applauded for their bravery, their personal stories are often overshadowed by scenes of anti-desegregation riots and the lengths to which citizens, elected officials, and law enforcement would go to ensure their schools remained segregated. In Early's piece *1961: Integrating the University of Georgia's Graduate School*, we get an inside look at what it meant to have the audacity of aspiration.

What was most striking about Early's account of her efforts to desegregate the University of Georgia's graduate school is just how human she was. A human who experienced a myriad of

racialized emotions, including fear, joy, uncertainty, desire, and hope. A human who saw beyond

the present moment and the feelings associated with her decision to enroll at the University of

Georgia and understood that what she fought for was far more lasting than her present

circumstances. Early recalled the moment she decided to transfer from the University of

Michigan to the University of Georgia, and amidst her mother's fear for her safety, she

responded with "Mother, this is something that I just have to do" (Daniels & Early, 2021, p. 56),

for education was seen as the key that opened the doors of possibility. This possibility was worth

fighting for and Mary Frances Early showed just how challenging that fight was.

It was not lost on Mary Frances Early that what she set out to accomplish came at great

risk to her physical safety. She watched live footage of the riots that took place after the

University of Georgia's decision to enroll its first Black students, Charlayne Hunter, and

Hamilton Holmes. She understood that the cost of the fight for desegregation was hefty and that

victories of this nature rarely came without consequences but remained resolute in her belief that

her place in this movement was at the University of Georgia. She wrote

> Though a rather quiet person, I felt strongly – like Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
> – that we must be the change that we want to see in the world. I felt that even as one person
> in this disturbing world of Jim Crow laws, I could contribute to the cause of civil rights
> and social justice (Daniels & Early, 2021, p. 57).

Though just as human as everyone else around her, Early's accounts of her time at the

University of Georgia highlighted yet another injustice of the Civil Rights Movement, which was

who had the right to show human emotions. Who was allowed to show fear? Who was allowed

to show anger? Who was allowed to passionately fight for what they believed in? The white

students who disagreed with the university's decision to enroll Mary, Charlayne, and Hamilton

were allowed to express their dissatisfaction and were even given grace when that dissatisfaction

manifested in physical attacks on their Black schoolmates. But Early knew she would not be given the same grace.

When recalling the condescending remarks made by members of the admissions committee during her entrance interview, Early wrote

> Though I succeeded in remaining calm, I left the interview feeling very disconcerted but still determined to follow through on my quest for admission. It is the nature of insults and slights that they can crawl into our psyches and poison our self-worth; what these men tried to do to me was unconscionable, and I am glad I was able to focus my energy on the higher purpose, which was to make UGA a place for all Georgians. (Daniels & Early, 2021, p. 60)

College campuses have long been the prime setting for resistance efforts aimed at both inequality in education as well as in the broader society. Though the causes themselves may have changed, Black students' social change orientation of the 21st century greatly mirrors student activism from previous eras, which suggests that where there is oppression, there too shall be resistance. Broadhurst (2014) posited that "regardless of the time period, the tactics employed, or the causes fought for, one commonality exists among student activists: They are trying to change the world" (p. 12).

Behind every student movement are the students themselves, with stories like Mary Frances Early, who decided to fight for the causes they believe in, but at what cost? Along with completing their courses of study, Black students often balance the weight of their resistance, their social lives, and overall well-being. With such heavy mental and academic loads, Dowd et al. (2011) argued that "the construct of student effort lacked recognition of the effort needed to counter the well-documented negative pressures experienced by members of racial-ethnic groups that are in the minority at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)" (p. 18). The sheer courage, effort, pain, and pride Mary Frances Early shared with readers about her time at the University of Georgia was both disheartening and empowering. Her desire to pursue a graduate education

surpassed her fear of the hostile environment she was to be educated in, and it is this desire, this audacity to aspire, that I plan to explore through this body of work. Early closed her account by saying "I also hoped that one day this type of situation would no longer exist" (Daniels & Early, 2021, p. 75), and though the days of anti-desegregation violence are behind us, the hostility still plagues our campuses- yet, *we are still here*.

Prior Research on Degree Aspirations

Background Characteristics

As noted by Renn and Reason (2012), students do not enter their college environments as "blank slates" (p. 19), each year, students walk onto their college campuses with a wealth of diversity evidenced in their beliefs, experiences, and backgrounds, all of which represent a student's inputs. As such, the way in which college students transition into higher education is heavily influenced by their unique set of inputs, resulting in evidenced disparities in successful integration into and navigation through their college environments (Renn & Reason, 2012).

Research into students' degree aspirations indicates that aspirations vary by background characteristics– race, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability in the form of achievement being the most commonly studied (Carter, 2001). With regard to gender, early studies on degree aspirations found that women, on average, have lower educational aspirations than men (Astin, 1977; McClelland, 1990) and were less likely to pursue a graduate degree after completing college. Wofford et al.'s (2022) investigation into factors predicting students' aspirations for computing graduate degrees and Li et al.'s (2022) exploration of the gender and racial barriers on educational aspiration further confirmed these gender differences when they found that female students were less likely to aspire to graduate education than their male peers. More specifically, Li et al. (2022) found that female students perceived high levels of sexism which in turn

predicted "the discrepancies between their precollege aspirations and actual pursuit for postgraduate degrees" (p. 753).

Early studies on social class and socioeconomic status found that social class and high school culture greatly influenced students' educational choices (McDonough, 1997) where low-income students were found to enroll in community colleges or less selective institutions at higher rates than their upper-middle-class peers, who largely attended private or more selective institutions which have been linked to higher degree attainment (Carter, 2001). Recent research shows that students from marginalized backgrounds are less likely to aspire toward higher education attainment than their peers (Carlton, 2015; Gardner & Holley, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; RTI International, 2021), further highlighting the discrepancies in educational aspirations and attainment stemming from students' backgrounds.

Social capital in higher education literature has been understood to be the resources rooted in social networks (Hill et al., 2015), and more specifically, social capital is understood to be "productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (Coleman, 1988, p. 98). Notably, scholars have made explicit the distinction between social capital and social support by outlining that while social support centers on the "encouragement and care" from one's social network, social capital instead refers to the "information and resources embedded in the social network" (Hill et al., 2015, p. 321). Based on this understanding of social capital, Carter (2001) contends that "socioeconomic status plays a part in determining who can participate in the contest for upward social mobility" (p. 34), further exacerbating educational and social inequities. These notions were also confirmed by Dorimé-Williams' (2020) exploration of the differences between Black students' socioeconomic status and their educational aspirations. Dorimé-Williams' (2020) found that high-income Black

students had increased odds of aspiring for graduate education than their low-income peers, again shedding light on Carter's (2001) assertions that socioeconomic status influences who can participate in the contest for upward social mobility in higher education. Wofford et al.'s (2022) investigation, however, found that family income was not significantly predictive of students' desire to pursue computing graduate degrees, which conflicts with prior research on the predictive power of socioeconomic status on students' graduate aspirations.

Pre-College Familial and Social Networks

In addition to students' background characteristics influencing their transition into higher education, how students navigate their campus environments in pursuit of their academic and social outcomes is also influenced by what they bring with them when they enter college. However, for students outside of the dominant culture, such as racial and generationally marginalized students, the capital they bring with them is often in stark contrast with the forms of capital valued on college campuses. This clash between the forms of capital that marginalized students enter college with and the cultural capital valued by the institution has come to be known as and explained by the cultural mismatch theory (Stephens et al., 2012).

Stephens et al.'s (2012) cultural mismatch theory posits that a mismatch in cultural norms and institutional norms can negatively affect students' academic performance and motivation. When Stephens et al. began to theorize about the cultural mismatch that occurs when first-generation students begin college, they made special note of first-generation students' backgrounds. The authors noted that first-generation students traditionally attend lower-quality high schools than their continuing-education peers, and as a result, often need additional academic and social support (Stephens et al., 2012). Phillips and colleagues (2020), also highlighted the fact that not only does cultural mismatch affect first-generation students'

academic success, but also their perceptions of whether they belong in the academic environment. Their research found that due to cultural mismatch, first-generation students reported a lower subjective sense of fit and belonging than their continuing-generation peers (Phillips et al., 2020).

While Philips et al. (2020) and Stephens et al. (2021) highlighted the role of cultural mismatch among first-generation students, they do not thoroughly examine how this phenomenon may manifest differently for Black first-generation students, particularly at PWIs. Furthermore, neither study explored how cultural mismatch affects long-term educational trajectories, such as graduate degree aspirations, nor did they address the systemic factors that may exacerbate or mitigate these challenges.

McCallum's (2012) investigation of factors that contribute to Black students' decision to enroll in doctoral programs showed evidence that Black students' familial and social networks influenced their graduate degree aspirations and McCarron and Inkelas' (2006) investigation of first- and continuing-generation students supports prior research that suggests that parent involvement is a "viable predictor of post-secondary aspirations" (p. 544). McCallum (2012) posits that "family relationships, specifically parental relationships, are the most salient relationships to African Americans considering the decision to enroll in doctoral education" (p. 147). These assertions were echoed by (Means et al. (2022), who found that being the first in their family to earn a college degree and their desire to repay their families for the sacrifices made in service of their educational pursuits served as motivation for Black students' academic persistence, further highlighting the influence of familial capital in driving educational aspirations. However, with regard to the influence of family on Black students' educational trajectories, McCallum argues that solely exploring the "influence of parents—which is typically

narrowed down to parents' income and education" limits our understanding of Black students'

sources of familial capital in the form of extended family and community—a relationship left

unexplored in Carter's (2002) seminal's work on degree aspirations.

Institutional Characteristics

Institutional characteristics have been found to impact student outcomes, including

achievement and aspirations (Carter, 2001), making the institution a student decides to enroll in

and the process by which they come to their decision crucial for understanding their outcomes.

The college-choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) outlines the process by which students

navigate through stages of higher education decision-making. The first stage, known as the

predisposition stage, involves deep investigation into occupational and education goals and seeks

to answer the question of whether higher education is the best avenue for achieving them

(Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Renn & Reason, 2021). Next comes the search stage, where students

deeply interrogate the concept of college fit by researching institutional differences and offerings

to make an informed decision about the types of institutions best suited for them. During this

stage, students may begin to think critically about what education historians consider to be the

market value of education credentials (Sullivan, 2004). As an extension of the college-choice

process mentioned above, Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student choice highlights factors

that influence a student's decision-making, such as demographic and economic factors, the

influence of cultural and social capital, and the overall school environment.

The institution a student decides to attend has been shown to have both academic and

social implications for Black students' outcomes and experiences as students who are confident

in their decision to enroll in their institution "report greater social involvement and those who

report positive faculty relationships and feel positive about their connections to peers of both

races have the greatest social involvement" (Allen, 1992, p. 35). As outlined in Perna's (2006) model, economic factors such as the cost of attendance play a significant role in the college choice process, and early research shows that institution cost independently impacts occupational attainment which disproportionately impacts students from low-income families. With research to support that higher education loans negatively impact degree completion for Black and low-income students and recent reports showing that graduate students own "nearly half of all student loan debt" (Palmer, 2024), financial barriers cannot be ignored when investigating factors that influence graduate degree aspirations.

Concerning the kinds of environments that have been found to have a positive impact on Black students' graduate degree aspirations, early research found Black college environments were predictive of Black students' graduate plans (Heath, 1992). In Allen's (1992) examination of Black student experiences at PWIs and HBCUs, he found that "Black students attending predominantly white colleges report lower academic achievement" (p. 35) compared to Black students attending HBCUs. Carter's (2001) findings support these notions in that HBCUs and "institutions with higher percentages of African Americans" (p. 126) were found to have positively affected Black student's degree aspirations.

For Black students attending PWIs, hostile campus climates have been widely viewed as a barrier to their successful integration into their campus culture. Campus racial climate has been defined as the general racial environment of, and collective attitude towards, a college campus (Hurtado et al., 2008; Solorzano et al., 2000). In other words, the racial climate of a college campus refers the overall perceptions of the college campus as it relates to race and diversity. With this definition in mind, a positive campus racial climate would include diverse populations being represented and supported on campus and a negative campus racial climate would be one

in which minoritized populations do not feel supported and fairly represented (Solórzano et al., 2000). One element of campus racial climate is the structural diversity of the institution. (Hurtado et al., 1999) define structural diversity as "the numerical representation of various racial, ethnic, and gender groups on campus" (p. 19). Often regarded as a crucial first step to fostering campus diversity, structural diversity has been linked to positive student perceptions of campus racial climate (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999, 2008). However, while increasing numerical diversity is a good first step to increasing overall campus diversity, increased numbers without the systems of support required to foster positive campus integration amongst marginalized students will only go so far.

College Experiences

Carter (2001) notes that "what is necessary for the development of African American aspirations is an environment that is supportive of African Americans" (p. 126) and researchers have found that hostile campus racial climates have adverse effects on Black student success and integration (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Griffin et al., 2012; Love, 2009; Solorzano et al., 2000). Griffin et al. (2012) utilized a campus racial climate framework to investigate the influence that campus racial climates have on diversity in graduate education. In framing graduate diversity within the context of campus climate, the researchers paid special attention to the ways in which negative racialized experiences influence a campus' racial climate. Drawing on previous research, Griffin et al. (2012) highlighted the fact that a hostile campus climate can negatively influence interactions between minoritized students and their peers, which can in turn hinder positive student engagement, retention, and development. This brings into focus the importance of peer interactions in the creation and perpetuation of a campus racial climate, where positive interactions between diverse groups can lead to a positive campus climate and vice versa.

Along with social interactions, student perceptions of their peers as well as the ways in which they themselves are perceived play a crucial role in shaping campus climates. Of particular relevance for Black students are stereotypes and microaggressions. In Fries-Britt and Griffin's (2007) qualitative exploration of high-achieving Black students' experience with stereotypes, the authors noted that rather than blatant forms of overt racism, Black students are instead being faced with more covert judgments based on general stereotypes. These subtle judgments have come to be known as microaggressions. Microaggressions, which are rooted in racial stereotypes, have been defined in previous research as everyday verbal, behavioral, or environmental interactions—whether intentional or unintentional—that convey hostility, derogation, or exclusion toward people of color (Sue et al., 2007).

To understand Black students' response to microaggressions and hostile campus racial climates, Solórzano et al. (2000) conducted focus group sessions with Black students attending elite universities. The authors found that the interpersonal conflict that arose from racial microaggressions greatly contributed to a hostile campus racial climate which often resulted in Black students feeling isolated and exhausted while trying to make academic progress (Solórzano et al., 2000). In accordance with Solórzano et al.'s (2000) findings, Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) noted that the high-achieving Black students who participated in their case study reported feeling the need to disprove the stereotypes their peers had of them by showcasing their academic prowess. Both studies showcased that not only are Black students aware of racial stereotypes and microaggressions on their campus, but they also feel the need to dispel them, which often comes at great academic and emotional cost.

The above-presented research showcased the relationship between hostile campus climates and Black students' navigational experiences which often involve exposure to hostility

in the form of microaggressions and stereotyping which results in disengagement from academic and social pursuits. However, research has found that positive racialized experiences and strong social relationships with peers, faculty, and staff support can sustain educational aspirations in the face of negative racialized experiences (Clayton et al., 2023; Gilkes Borr, 2019; Keels, 2020; Robinson, 2014; Tichavakunda, 2022). In Clayton et al.'s (2023) exploration of Black students' experiences in a McNair Scholars Program, a program designed to "help minoritized students navigate the complex process of preparing for and enrolling in graduate school" (p. 4), participants reported that they could rely on their McNair peer group for support. One student expressed that the support of their peer group allowed them to not feel "alone in the process" (Clayton et al., 2023, p. 10), a commonly shared experience of Black students attending PWIs (Solórzano et al., 2000). As described by Tichavakunda (2022), "collectivism in Black student communities also has positive educational implications" where the findings of his study on positive racialized emotions revealed that "being around other Black people, having the time and space to simply meet with each other facilitates Black joy on White campuses" (p. 432).

Clayton et al.'s (2023) findings support prior research that indicates that peer support strengthens academic engagement and motivations for pursuing graduate school, but it is important to note the impact of pre-college graduate aspirations in combination with peer support. As outlined by Astin's early work on the four-year effects of college "student's degree aspirations at the time of college entrance are the most potent predictors of enrollment in graduate or professional schools" (Astin, 1977, p.112). Given that the participants in Clayton et al.'s (2023) study applied to participate in a graduate school preparation program, it would suggest that those students already had high graduate degree aspirations which were then sustained through near-peer support.

When asked about the influence of the McNair program's administrators and faculty mentors on their experience, students in Clayton et al.'s (2023) study shared that the support they received was "unlike any support they received elsewhere on campus" (Clayton et al., 2023, p. 10). One participant elaborated on the uniqueness of the support received from McNair administrators and shared that program staff was supportive of them "as a person" (p. 10) and their faculty mentors made them feel "comfortable" (p. 14) in asking for support. This example speaks to the impact of feeling a strong sense of membership within an academic community and being seen as a "person" rather than a combination of disadvantaged circumstances.

Sense of belonging has been defined as an individual's identification and affiliation with their community (Hausmann et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2018). According to Strayhorn (2018), students' ability to successfully integrate into their university's social and academic systems fosters a sense of belonging which positively affects academic commitment and persistence. Researchers have also been able to connect a strong sense of belonging to increased student academic motivation and a positive overall college experience (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2009). O'Keeffe (2013) went further to explain that developing a sense of belonging is especially crucial for students who are at risk for non-completion, such as students with disabilities, ethnic minorities, low-income students, and first-generation students. However, the way students experience belonging varies greatly across racial, ethnic, and generational groups (Duran et al., 2020; Hausmann et al., 2009; Soria & Stebleton, 2012), and research indicates that many institutions fail to create environments that honor diverse student backgrounds, thus impacting their overall sense of belonging and academic success (Museus et al., 2017).

Summary of Prior Research

The research presented highlights the multifaceted factors influencing marginalized students' graduate degree aspirations. Students' background characteristics, including race, generation status, and socioeconomic status, have been found to shape their educational trajectories, with pre-college experiences, such as cultural mismatch and social capital, further impacting their higher education trajectories. For Black students, institutional factors, including structural diversity, play a critical role in shaping their academic and social experiences while hostile campus climates, marked by negative racialized experiences such as microaggressions and stereotypes, often hinder their sense of belonging and academic progress. Positive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, as well as supportive programs like the McNair Scholars Program, have been shown to sustain educational aspirations (Walpole, 2008). Ultimately, both negative and positive racialized experiences, combined with peer and institutional support, have been shown to significantly influence Black students' persistence and desire to pursue graduate education.

What is missing from these explorations, however, is a thorough, assets-based investigation of the influence of Black students' sources of community cultural wealth on graduate degree aspirations. An assets-based approach is essential for this work as it shifts the focus from the barriers Black students face as they navigate higher education to strengths, resources, and cultural capital they draw upon to persist and aspire for graduate study. By centering community cultural wealth, this study acknowledges the resilience and navigational strategies that shape Black students' academic trajectories.

Theoretical Frameworks

Degree Aspirations

The present study was guided primarily by Carter's (2002) conceptual model of degree aspirations. In line with foundational college impact models that view student outcomes, which for the present study is graduate degree aspirations, as a function of their inputs and environments (Astin, 1993), Carter's model posits that students' degree aspirations are influenced by their background characteristics, initial educational goals, academic achievement, and college experiences. As it relates to inputs, Carter argued that factors such as students' socioeconomic status, family status, race/ethnicity, age, gender, pre-college achievement, familial support, knowledge of degree and career paths, and initial aspirations and goals may influence their college experiences and ultimate degree aspirations. As for the environmental factors, Carter's model highlights how structural characteristics (institution size, level, control, selectivity, and racial and ethnic enrollment) and institutional contexts (available financial aid, campus climate, and involvement with students) may influence students' experiences and degree aspirations. When combined, her model argues that students' backgrounds along with institutional contexts and experiences, shape degree aspirations with a unique "focus on the formation and change of aspirations as a result of social interactions and structural processes" (Carter, 2002, p. 129).

Carter's (2002) model advanced the theory of college impact in that it centered on the backgrounds, experiences, and educational aspirations of Black and Latina/o/x students, a major critique of traditional impact models that do not account for "the constraints placed on such investments by students who experience incongruence, racial discrimination, or stratified workforce opportunities" (Dowd et al., 2011, p. 18). In addition to theoretical advancements, Carter's (2002) model also offered practical implications as it informed policy and programming geared toward better supporting the degree aspirations of marginalized students – a primary goal

of the present study. Though comprehensive in its focus on students' social interactions and structural elements, it is limited in its exploration of what Yosso (2005) classifies as the "various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth" that "students of color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom" (p. 69). Therefore, in order to extensively explore Black students' inputs and their influence on graduate degree aspirations, I extend Carter's (2002) model by incorporating Yosso's (2005) concepts of community cultural wealth.

Community Cultural Wealth

Much of the literature on marginalized students' access to and experiences through higher education with regard to increased social mobility and human capital through investments made in higher education is framed from a deficit perspective and assumes that "people of color 'lack' the social and cultural capital required for social mobility" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). This framing stems from Bourdieu's (2011) assertions that the cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities unique to the upper and middle class are most valued by society and can only be acquired through family and formal schooling. Yosso critiques this framing by asserting that "while Bourdieu's work sought to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). By drawing on tenants of critical race theory, Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth adds to our understanding of cultural capital by examining the cultural capital unique to marginalized communities that traditional cultural capital theories fail to recognize and value. Given this study's goal of understanding Black students' graduate degree aspirations by investigating the impact of their unique inputs, I add to Carter's (2005) model by examining the following forms of community cultural wealth described by Yosso.

Aspirational capital: This form of capital refers to marginalized communities' ability to hold on to hope when faced with immediate and systemic barriers. This resiliency, as described by Yosso, "is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). As Dr. Maya Angelou (1994) so beautifully captured in her poem *Still I Rise*

> Out of the huts of history's shame
> I rise
> Up from a past that's rooted in pain
> I rise
> I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
> Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
>
> Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
> I rise
> Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
> I rise
> Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
> I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
> I rise
> I rise
> I rise (p. 164).

It is the Black community's historically evidenced aspiration to *rise* in pursuit of education (see Ernest Green, Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls of the Little Rock Nine, Ruby Bridges of Mississippi, and Mary Frances Early) that traditional models of cultural capital often ignore and Carter's (2002) model of degree aspirations does not thoroughly investigate when reviewing the pre-college characteristics that influence Black student's degree aspirations.

Familial capital: Familial capital refers to "those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community, history, memory, and cultural intuition" (Yosso,

2005, p. 79). This form of capital is included in Carter's (2002) model as support from family and others, however, it is not thoroughly explored through her analyses. By drawing on Yosso's (2005) assertions that "familial capital is nurtured by our 'extended family', which may include immediate family (living or long passed) as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends who we might consider part of our *familia*" (p.79), I extend Carter's original framing on the impact of Black's students' communities of support on their graduate degree aspirations.

Social capital: Social capital, while similar to familial capital in its exploration into the cultural knowledge gained when in community with kin, focuses more specifically on the "networks of people and community resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). This construct is also marginally included in Carter's (2005) model through pre-college support from others and institutional contexts such as participation in peer activities, however, scholars have made explicit the distinction between social capital and social support by outlining that while social support centers on the "encouragement and care" from one's social network, social capital instead refers to the "information and resources embedded in the social network" (Hill et al., 2015, p. 321). Yosso explains that "historically, People of Color have utilized their social capital to attain education, legal justice, employment, and health care. In turn, Communities of Color gave the information and resources they have gained through these institutions back to their social networks" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). By incorporating these notions of social capital, I again extend what Carter posits as the pre-college and institutional contexts that influence Black students' graduate degree aspirations by shifting the focus from institutionalized forms of support to the rich networks of social capital that function as an active force in shaping Black students' educational aspirations.

Navigational capital: Navigational capital refers to the "skills of maneuvering through

social institutions" that have historically not been "created with Communities of Color in mind" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Yosso (2005) goes on to explain that navigational capital can be evidenced through communities of color navigating through "racially-hostile university campuses" (p. 80) that have been evidenced to illicit feelings of isolation and separation from the general student body in Black students (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Griffin et al., 2012; D. Love, 2009; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2023). Carter's (2002) model includes campus climate as an institutional context variable but goes on to explain that it was not measured in her study. As such, by investigating Black students' perception of their campus' racial climate both before and during enrollment and the influence those perceptions play on their educational trajectories, I add explorations of navigational capital to Carter's framing of the development of degree aspirations over time.

Resistant capital: The last of Yosso's (2005) forms of cultural capital being incorporated into this study's conceptual framework is resistant capital. This form of capital speaks to the "knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" and is "grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Community of Color" (p. 80). It's the ancestral gifts Dr. Angelou (1994) credits for the Black community's ability to *rise.* It's Mary Frances Early assuring her mother that despite the risk to her physical, emotional, and mental safety, integrating the University of Georgia was something she just *had to do* and it's the Black audacity to aspire beyond their individual and collective circumstances in pursuit of racial justice.

Though commended for its departure from traditional deficit framings, Yosso's (2005) work has been criticized for its lack of exchangeability, underutilization of key Bourdieusian concepts, and inadequate exploration of racial oppression in the United States (Song, 2024).

Through an ethnographic study of a community school in Chinatown, Song's (2024) critique of community cultural wealth rethinks Yosso's (2005) original framing by highlighting how marginalized communities exchange cultural practices with the formal education system. Song (2024) argues that missing from Yosso's framework is a nuanced understanding of how formal systems of education do not merely prioritize dominant cultural capital but that the higher education culture *has* capital. To this end, Song (2024) posits that Yosso's model underutilizes Bourdieusian concepts of capital exchange and legitimization and, therefore, does not thoroughly investigate how marginalized students convert or translate their community cultural capital into institutional advantages. By drawing on Bourdieusian concepts and redirecting attention to the processes through which marginalized communities exchange their cultural capital within formal systems of education, Song (2024) contends, would strengthen Yosso's argument and application of the community cultural wealth model.
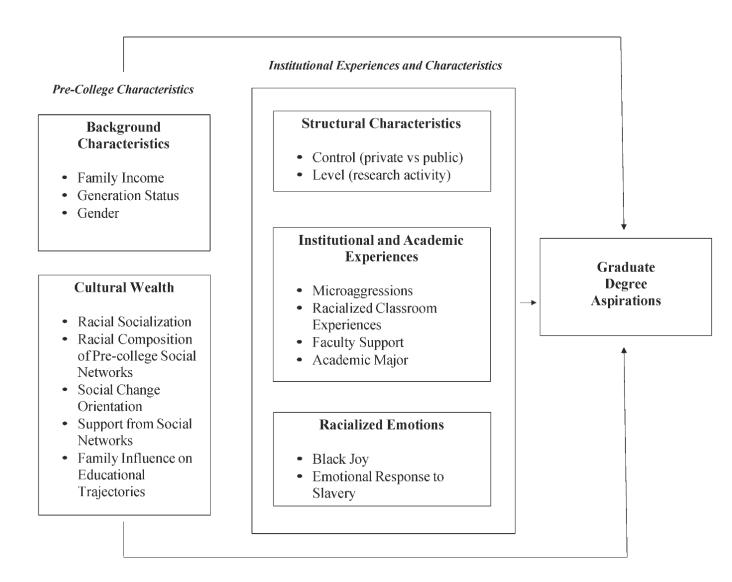
Conceptual Framework For Factors Influencing Black Students' Graduate Degree Aspirations

I present below my proposed conceptual framework for the factors influencing Black students' graduate degree aspirations that draw upon Carter's (2002) framework of Degree Aspirations and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model. The proposed framework addressed gaps in Carter's model through the inclusion of Yosso's asset-based framing of marginalized communities' cultural wealth. Additionally, the shortcomings of Yosso's model, as outlined by Sun (2024), were addressed through the inclusion of structural (campus racial climate) and systemic (experiences with racism) factors that make it difficult for Black students to capitalize on their cultural wealth throughout their education journeys. By integrating these two frameworks and addressing their respective gaps, the conceptual model highlights the rich

cultural assets that Black students bring to educational spaces and the structural and institutional environments known to disadvantage Black students to examine the pre-college characteristics and institutional experiences that shape Black students' educational trajectories beyond the baccalaureate.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework For Factors Influencing Black Students' Graduate Degree Aspirations

Summary

This literature review began by contextualizing the study of Black students' graduate degree aspirations within the broader historical framework of higher education in the United States. It underscored the pivotal role that education has played in the Black liberation movement, serving as both a tool of empowerment and resistance. By exploring the historical and contemporary experiences of Black students, this review highlights the significance of education in the Black community, particularly focusing on how often-overlooked and undervalued forms of cultural capital have shaped and continue to influence Black students' aspirations for graduate education. Guided by Carter's (2002) conceptual model of degree aspirations, Yosso's (2005) concepts of community cultural wealth, and my proposed conceptual framework of factors influencing Black students' graduate degree aspirations, this exploration aims to further investigate the unique barriers and assets within the intersectional Black student experience that contribute to their pursuit of advanced degrees.

CHAPTER 3: CONVERGENT PARALLEL MIXED METHODOLOGY

Throughout this chapter, I accomplish four goals. First, I summarize the broad aims of this project as previously discussed in Chapter 1 and reiterate the research questions guiding this project. Second, I give a detailed description of the convergent parallel mixed methodology approach utilized to answer my guiding research questions. Third, I aim to address my role as a researcher and instrument of analysis making clear the potential biases and personal perspectives I bring with me as I engage in this meaningful work. Lastly, I conclude this section with a discussion of the advantages of this study's design, and the research permissions and ethical considerations taken.

Project Goals

The present project has three main goals. First, I believe this work has the potential to amplify Black student voices by allowing us to learn from our students as they share with us their experiences. It is my hope that my participants are viewed as more than just data points and that my readers come to understand just how dynamic and multifaceted the Black student experience and development of their aspirations can be through an exploration of their joys, hardships, and everything in between.

Second, by developing a framework for better understanding and supporting Black students' graduate degree pursuits that incorporates contemporary literature and considers various aspects of their nuanced and dynamic identity, my goal is to advance higher education theory of graduate degree aspirations. Lastly, I hope to be able to bridge the gap between research and practice by developing a set of important practices focused on understanding graduate degree aspirations that can equip higher education researchers and practitioners to better support marginalized students.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

As outlined in Chapter Two, while prior explorations of marginalized students' degree aspirations have provided valuable insights, they often overlook a comprehensive, strengths-based examination of how Black students' sources of community cultural wealth contribute to shaping their aspirations for graduate education. This approach is crucial for uncovering the nuanced ways in which cultural assets and lived experiences interact to foster long-term academic goals.

Given these gaps in prior research, my dissertation will address the following research questions:

Quantitative Phase:

1. What forms of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions are associated with the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending PWIs?

Qualitative Phase:

2. How do Black students attending PWIs describe the impact of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions on their undergraduate experience and graduate degree aspirations?

Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Research Design

Throughout this work, I utilize a mixed methods research design to answer the above-stated research questions. By definition, employing mixed methodology for data collection and analysis involves the "mixing" or integrating of quantitative and qualitative data throughout the research process for the purpose of gaining a more in-depth understanding of an identified research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ivankova et al., 2006). The impetus for

integrating both methodologies is that together they allow for a more thorough exploration and understanding of complex human experiences, such as the intersectional experiences of Black students and their graduate degree aspirations. Given this study's goal of exploring nuanced and intersectional identities and experiences, the numerical data captured through quantitative inquiry and the narrative data captured through qualitative inquiry, when combined, will allow for a more complete analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018), quantitative research designs "reflect positivist philosophical assumptions" and focus on measuring "a parsimonious set of variables to answer theory-guided research questions and hypotheses" (p. 206). In doing so, quantitative research relies on numerical data to test theories by exploring the relationship among identified variables of interest. Researchers who utilize quantitative methodologies then have the burden of care to thoughtfully choose the variables to be investigated as well as the best-suited instrument of analysis, and if done correctly, will yield results that are reliable and valid. However, relying solely on quantitative methodologies may lead to findings being misinterpreted or over-generalized, and leave out complexity and nuance in the research.

Alternatively, qualitative research designs are best suited for "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 41). Unlike quantitative research which focuses on theory and variable relationship testing, theory in qualitative research is used to provide a broad explanation of a concept or behavior and provide a framework for guiding the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) while prioritizing the lived experiences of individuals immersed in the setting in which the study is situated (Ivankova et al., 2006). Qualitative analysis is also unique in the sense that the researchers themselves are the instrument of data collection and analysis, which requires

researchers to deeply and regularly interrogate their role and positionality to minimize the impact of personal bias on their findings. In this reflective process, researchers engaged in qualitative research make clear how their experiences, background, and culture shape the direction of the research and their interpretation of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As earlier outlined, the purpose of mixed-methods research is to capitalize on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research to present findings that tell as complete a story as possible. By combining both methodologies, mixed-methods research not only capitalizes on the strengths of each in order to develop a deeper understanding of the research problem, but the integration also allows the researcher to address and overcome the limitations of using one method or the other (Ivankova et al., 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). From a methodological standpoint, the use of mixed methodologies serves to illustrate that quantitative and qualitative methods are compatible, moving the research community away from an *either-or* to a *yes-and* approach to empirical storytelling.
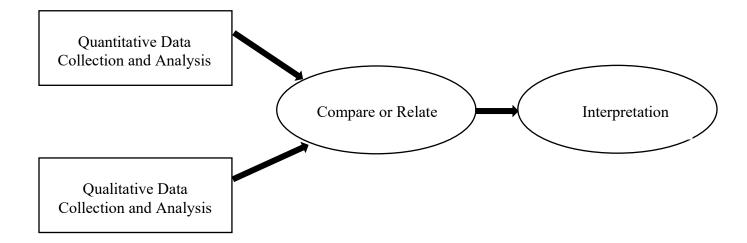
There are numerous mixed-methods research designs reported in the literature (Almeida, 2018; Creswell & Clark, 2017), each with its strengths and weaknesses, but for the present study, a convergent parallel design was chosen. A convergent parallel design involves two distinct phases, where quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed separately and then merged for analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

For the present study, the quantitative phase involved data collection through a web-based survey, followed by data analysis using a multinomial logistic regression to identify the potential predictive power of cultural capital, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions variables on the degree aspirations of Black students. The qualitative phase involved a thematic exploration of how Black students describe the impact of community cultural wealth, racialized

43

experiences, and racialized emotions on their undergraduate experience and graduate degree

aspirations. The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data and findings will provide

a general snapshot of the factors that influence Black students' degree aspirations, while the

qualitative data and subsequent analysis will refine and strengthen the statistical results by

investigating students' backgrounds, views, and experiences in more depth. A visual model for

the above-mentioned convergent parallel procedure is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.

Visual model of Convergent Parallel Mixed Design (adapted from Creswell & Clark, 2017)

Quantitative Design

Sample and Data Sources

The analytic sample for the quantitative portion of this study came from undergraduate students of African descent enrolled at twelve different colleges and universities with documented histories of enslavement. All students completed the Black Student Experiences at Universities with Historical Relationships to Slavery survey designed by Garibay and colleagues (2020) to explore their experiences attending institutions with enslavement histories. The Black Student Experiences at Universities with Historical Relationships to Slavery survey was designed to capture "the various ways this important [slavery] history may relate to students' college choice, sense of belonging, engagement, learning, health factors, and other educational experiences" and included questions that focused on "student' background characteristics and experiences, the college choice process, emotional, psychological, and behavioral responses to attending college at an institution with a historical relationship to slavery, perceptions of and interactions with faculty and white students, experiences with racial microaggressions, sense of belonging, satisfaction, and perceptions of the institution" (Garibay et al., 2020, p. 702).

As outlined by the authors, the survey items were developed using literature on Black students' experiences in higher education. The SBSE for Garibay et al.'s (2020) proposed full-scale study was revised using pilot study data (IRB approval in April 2018, #2018-0153-00) collected in 2018-2019 from 118 Black undergraduates from one institution (which helped establish proof of concept), feedback from presentations at scholarly conferences, and scholarly experts. Three education scholars with expertise in the experiences of Black college students

evaluated the face validity of the survey items, and one scholar with expertise in survey methodology assessed the suitability of the item sets for scale construction.

The full survey consists of instructions and an informed consent form that asks participants to express their compliance to participate in the study and complete the survey followed by thirty-nine questions organized into four distinct sections. The first section of the survey included filter questions asking students whether they identify as a person of African descent and if they are eighteen years or older. If a student responded "No" to either filter question, they were automatically directed to the end of the survey as they did not meet the criteria for selection. The second section focused on asking initial background questions including students' current class standing, the number of years they've attended their institution, enrollment status, academic major, pre-college racial composition and socialization, and their knowledge of their institution's enslavement history. The third section explored students' college experiences and was broken into five subsections: (1) experiences with faculty, (2) experiences related to the university's involvement in slavery, (3) experiences with peers, (4) diverse experiences in the classroom, and (5) additional college experiences. The fourth and final section gathered student demographic data, including students' descendant status, ethnicity, gender, citizenship status, sexual orientation, family income, generation status, political affiliation, academic aspirations, and academic achievement.

As will be outlined in more detail through the exploration of the measures used throughout this study, items from each of the four above-mentioned sections will be used to address the guiding research questions. IRB approval for survey administration and data collection was obtained in the Fall of 2023, and the online survey was administered through Qualtrics between October 2023 and November 2023 for 11 of the 12 institutions and in

February-March 2024 for the 12th institution. One of the advantages of web-based surveys is that participants' responses are automatically stored in a database and easily transformed into numerical Excel-format data for analysis. The survey was promoted and shared with students through (a) direct emails to students (students' emails addressed were shared with researchers by institutional contacts), (b) Black student organization leaders, and (d) flyers shared with institutional contacts posted on student bulletin boards. To encourage student participation, post-survey completion students were given the option to be entered into a drawing for a $25 Amazon gift card.

In total, 1167 students across twelve higher education institutions with documented histories of enslavement who self-identified as being of African descent completed the survey. However, as this study primarily focused on the intersection of race and generation status, the final sample was limited to the participants who provided parent/guardian degree attainment data which was used to determine students' generation status and had at least a 40% completion rate on the survey. As such, the final analytic sample for this study consisted of 556 undergraduate students of African descent, 36% of whom are first-generation and 64% continuing-generation students. The sample was representative of all academic class years and included first-year (30%), second-year (23%), third-year (23%), fourth-year (21%), and fifth-year (3%) students with varying academic majors. Student gender was also captured, and the sample included cisgender men (28%), cisgender women (67%), and trans/gender-expansive (5%). Other descriptive statistics will be presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Summary of Variables

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max
Community cultural wealth				
Racial composition	.95	0.74	-1.03	2.97
Racial socialization	1.30	0.62	-1.03	1.97
Social change orientation	0.94	0.71	-1.03	1.97
Institutional contexts and experiences				
Campus racial climate: microaggressions	-0.10	0.86	-1.03	2.97
Campus racial climate: racialized classroom experiences	1.51	1.11	-1.03	2.97
Faculty support	2.98	1.05	1	4
Racialized emotions				
Black joy	1.59	0.94	-1.03	2.97
Emotional slavery response	-2.11	0.98	-1.03	1.97

Categorical variables		n	
Background characteristics			
Family income	Low	102	
	Medium	257	
	High	201	
First generation			
	No	359	
	Yes	201	
Gender			
	Cisgender man	159	
	Cisgender woman	373	
	Trans/gender-expansive	28	
Structural characteristics			
Institutional control			
	Public	435	
	Private not for profit	125	
Degree Level			
	Baccalaureate college	28	
	High research activity	76	
	Very high research activity	456	
Institutional contexts and experiences			
STEM major			
	No	257	
	Yes	299	
Dependent variable			
Graduate degree aspirations			
	Bachelor's	154	
	Master's	193	
	PhD	70	
	Professional/ medical doctorate	143	

Measures

Independent Variables. Guided by Carter's (2002) theoretical model of factors

influencing college students' degree aspirations and Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural

wealth, the proposed intersectional model of Black college students' graduate degree aspirations

includes measures of background characteristics, community cultural wealth, structural

characteristics, institutional contexts, academic achievement, faculty and staff support, and

racialized emotions. The below-outlined factors that contribute to/hinder Black students'

graduate degree aspirations were identified using relevant literature on the afterlife of slavery,

anti-Blackness, racial socialization, students of color's racialized experiences, and racialized

motions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Dumas, 2016; Garibay et al., 2020; Lawson, 2024; Lewis-

Giggetts, 2022; Smith et al., 2007; Stevenson, 1994; Tichavakunda, 2022); and theories

including graduate degree aspirations, community cultural wealth, college choice, and campus

racial climate (Carter, 2002; Hurtado et al., 1998, 2008; Perna, 2006; Yosso, 2005) and are

treated as predictors or independent variables because they influence or affect the outcome of

interest. A more detailed presentation of key variable definitions and corresponding numerical

codes can be found in Table 2 and Table 3.

a) Background characteristics: family income, generation status, gender;

b) Community cultural wealth factors: familial capital (racial socialization and family's

influence on educational trajectories), social capital (racial composition), navigational

capital (college choice), resistance capital (social change orientation);

c) Structural characteristics: institution control (private vs. public), institution level

(research activity);

d) Institutional and academic experiences: microaggressions and racialized classroom

experiences (campus racial climate), faculty support, academic major;

e) Racialized emotions factors: Black joy, emotional response to slavery

Dependent Variable: The outcome variable of interest, graduate degree aspirations,

stems from Carter's (2002) assertions on degree aspirations measured by the highest degree a

student expects to attain. As such, graduate degree aspiration was captured through the single

survey item "What is the highest degree that you intend to obtain?". Based on the approach prior

studies have used to examine graduate degree aspirations quantitatively (Cuellar & Gonzalez,

2021b), responses were recoded into a four-response categorical variable: 1 = bachelor's, 2 =

master's, 3 = PhD, 4 = professional or medical doctorate (EdD, PsyD, MD, DDS, DMV, JD,

etc.), and the bachelor's degree category served as the reference group for the multivariate

analysis

Table 2. Variables for Multinomial Logistic Regression Definitions and Numerical Codes

Variable	Description and Codes
Independent	
Background Characteristics	
Family Income	A single-item measuring students' total family income. Coded: 1 = Low (less than $15,000 - $29,000); 2 = Middle ($30,000 - $99,999); 3 = High ($100,000 - $500,000).
Generation Status	A single-item measuring parent/guardian's highest degree earned. Coded: 0 = Continuing-generation (Bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctoral or professional degree) 1 = First-generation (Junior high/middle school or less, some high school, high school graduate/GED; some college, associate's degree).
Gender	A single-item measuring students' gender identity. Coded: 1 = Cisgender man; 2 = Cisgender woman; 3 = Trans/gender-expansive.
Community Cultural Wealth	
Racial Socialization	Variable consisting of the following items: (1) Growing up, I was surrounded by Black art, music, and literature; (2) My family/primary caretakers spoke often about the experiences of Black people; (3) I have a deep understanding of Black history; (4) Growing up, my family/primary caretakers often spoke to me about racism (each coded on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1= strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).
Racial Composition	A 4-item measure assessing the racial composition of students' neighborhood, high school, friends in high school, teachers in school (each coded on a 5-point

	Likert-type scale from 1 = all or nearly all white to 5 = all or nearly all people of color).
Social Change Orientation	Variable consisting of the following items: (1) Influencing the political structure; (2) Influencing social values; (3) Helping others who are in difficulty; (4) Participating in a community action program; (5) Working to achieve racial equity; (6) Becoming a community leader; (7) Working for social justice (each coded on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 = not important to 4 = essential).

Structural Characteristics

Institution Control	Institution Carnegie classification Coded: 0 = Public; 1 = Private not for profit.
Institution Level	Institution Carnegie classification Coded: 1 = Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Science focus; 2 = Doctoral University: High Research Activity; 3 = Doctoral University; Very High Research Activity.

Institutional and Academic Experiences

Racial Microaggressions	The first of two campus climate measures comprised of the following items: (1) Nonverbal slights related to my race/ethnicity; (2) Poorer service because of my race/ethnicity; (3) Perceived to be dishonest because of my race ethnicity; (4) Perceived to be less intelligent because of my race ethnicity; (5) Feared by members of the campus community because of your race/ethnicity; (6) Stopped for questioning by campus law enforcement; (7) Perceived to not be a student on this campus (each coded on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = never to 5 = very often).

Racialized Classroom Experiences	The second of two latent campus climate measures comprised of the following items: (1) Felt like a token representative for your race; (2) Felt like you were expected to be the spokesperson for your race in class; (3) Were the only member or one of a few members of your race in your class (each coded on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = never to 5 = very often).
STEM	A single-item measuring students' academic major. Coded: 0 = Non-STEM (Arts and Humanities, Business, Education, Ethnic Studies, Social Science, Psychology); 1 = STEM (Agricultural Sciences, Biological and Life Sciences; Computer Science, Earth, Atmosphere, and Ocean Science, Engineering, Health Professions, Math or Statistics, Physical Science).
Perceived Support from Faculty Member	A single item measuring whether at least one faculty member has taken an interest in students' development (each coded on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).

Racialized Emotions

Black Joy	Variable measuring frequency of experiencing the following items: (1) Joy/happiness; (2) Fun/pleasure; (3) A sense of fulfillment; (4) Feeling loved/ cared for (each coded on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = never to 4 = very often).
Emotional Response to Slavery	A latent variable consisting of the following items: (1) I often feel sad because of this institution's involvement with slavery; (2) I often feel frustrated because of this institution's involvement with slavery; (3) I often feel anger because of this institution's involvement with slavery; (4) I often feel resentment towards this university because of its involvement with slavery (each coded on a 4-point Liker-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).

53

Outcome

Degree Aspirations

A single item measuring the highest level of education a student expects to attain.
Coded: 1 = Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S., B.D., etc.); 2 = Master's degree (M.A., M.S., M.B.A., etc.); 3 = PhD, 4 = Professional or Medical Doctorate (EdD, PsyD, MD, DDS, DMV, JD, etc.)

Table 3. Factor Loadings and Reliability Coefficients for Factors in Multinomial Logistic
Regression

Factor	Items	α	Loadings
Slavery History Emotional Response		0.92	
	I often feel sad because of this institution's involvement with slavery		0.91
	I often feel frustrated because of this institution's involvement with slavery		0.90
	I often feel resentment towards this university because of its involvement with slavery		0.90
	I often feel anger because of this institution's involvement with slavery		0.89
Racial Microaggressions		0.89	
	Stopped for questioning by campus law enforcement		0.89
	Perceived to not be a student on this campus		0.89
	Feared by members of the campus community because of your race/ethnicity		0.88
	Verbal insults related to your race/ethnicity		0.88
	Nonverbal slights related to your race/ethnicity		0.88
	Poorer service because of your race/ethnicity		0.87
	Perceived to be dishonest because of your race ethnicity		0.87
	Perceived to be less intelligent because of your race ethnicity		0.87
Racialized Classroom Experiences		0.81	
	Were the only member or one of a few members of your race in your class		0.88
	Felt like you were expected to be the spokesperson for your race in class		0.66

	Felt like a token representative for your race	0.64
Black Joy		0.93
	Feeling loved/cared for	0.93
	Fun/Pleasure	0.90
	A sense of fulfillment	0.90
	Joy/Happiness	0.89
Racial Socialization		0.77
	Growing up, I was surrounded by Black art, music, and literature	0.76
	I have a deep understanding of Black history	0.73
	Growing up, my family/primary caretakers often spoke to me about racism	0.71
	My family/primary caretakers spoke often about the experiences of Black people	0.65
		0.89
	Becoming a community leader	0.89
Social Change Orientation	Influencing the political structure	0.88
	Helping others who are in difficulty	0.88
	Influencing social values	0.87
	Participating in a community action program	0.87
	Working to achieve racial equity	0.87
	Working for social justice	0.87

Analytic Strategy

Descriptive and Missing Data Analyses: Before beginning the statistical analysis of the survey data, descriptive and missing data analyses were first conducted on the survey dataset. Descriptive statistics were conducted to get a better understanding of the sample and examine the distributions of the independent and dependent variables of interest. Missing data analyses revealed that each variable of interest had less than 1% missing data, and retained data was analyzed in Stata 17.

Factor Analysis: Construct validity ensures agreement between theory and a specific measure. To achieve construct validity, factor analyses of Likert survey items must be performed to examine factor loadings and assess correlations between the survey item and the overall factor (Hoyle, 2023). Successful factor analysis should reveal several variables with strong loadings, where each variable should have a large commonality (Kim & Mueller, 1978). Given that the underlying structure of the factor variables used throughout this study had been established on prior empirical and theoretical grounds (Hoyle, 2023) (see Garibay et al., 2020) factor analyses were run to test if the hypothesized factors for the Black joy, emotional response to slavery, racial microaggressions, racialized classroom experiences, racial socialization and social change orientation work for the dataset.

Multinomial Logistic Regression: Lastly, as the dependent variable of interest is categorial with more than one possibility (1 = bachelor's, 2 = master's, 3 = PhD, 4 = professional or medical doctorate (EdD, PsyD, MD, DDS, JD, etc.), a multinomial logistic model was conducted to estimate the probably of falling into one category or another when considering various independent variables (Hosmer et al., 2013). For the present study, using the bachelor's degree option as the referent group, the multinomial logistic regression will examine the factors

associated with increased or decreased odds of aspiring to earn a degree beyond the

baccalaureate. Results from the multinomial logistic regression analyses are reported as delta-p

statistics.

Qualitative Design

The qualitative phase of this study will focus on participants' descriptions of their

experiences using thematic analysis. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the process of

thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative

data. Unlike phenomenological research that seeks to uncover the essence of participants' lived

experiences, researchers utilizing thematic analysis focus on capturing patterns and meaning,

which allows for a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives on a given

phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In the context of the present study, the focus of the thematic analysis will be to examine

how Black students attending PWIs describe the impact of their unique cultural capital, often

undervalued by predominantly white institutions (Cureton, 2003), and how their racialized

experiences and emotions during their undergraduate tenure impact their desire to pursue

graduate education. To understand the phenomenon and improve student experiences, this study

aims to not solely describe participants' experiences but also the meaning and value they ascribe

to their experiences. This approach allows for both an inductive exploration of emerging themes

and a theoretically informed analysis guided by existing literature on community cultural wealth

(Yosso, 2005) and degree aspirations (Carter, 2002).

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six-phase process for conducting thematic analysis: (1)

familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing

themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. In line with the recursive

nature of thematic analysis, I adhered to this process while allowing for flexibility and movement between phases as needed to refine the thematic structure. By adopting thematic analysis, this study aims to move beyond individual narratives to capture broader patterns that speak to the collective experiences of Black students navigating PWIs.

Given the interpretive nature of thematic analysis, researchers play an active role in identifying themes, making it imperative to acknowledge and disclose how their positionality inevitably shapes the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The results presented in this work are my participants' stories as interpreted through my own narrative lens. Thus, my audience must understand me as a researcher. Being transparent about my story provides insight into how I approach this work and, in doing so, illuminates the perspectives I hold and the ones I may be blind to – this I believe to be one of the greatest responsibilities of a qualitative researcher. As the work of data collection and analysis is not done in a vacuum, in the section to follow, I share my journey and personal graduate degree aspirations that began on a tiny island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea.

Role of the Researcher

Reflexivity: My role as a researcher differs for the quantitative and qualitative phases of this study. In the quantitative phase, my role as a researcher was to administer the survey for data collection, analyze the data by performing rigorous statistics analysis, and then interpret the results based on established statistical significance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In contrast, "qualitative research is interpretive", so my role as a researcher for the qualitative phase of this study assumes "sustained and intensive experience with participants" which by nature introduces ethical concerns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 260). As outlined in Lunenburg and Irby (2007), the perspectives and experiences I carry with me as a researcher aid in my interpretation and

understanding of my participants' experiences, but without proper acknowledgment of my prior experiences and how they shape my interpretation, ethical issues might arise. To mitigate these potential risks, I share my personal story to make clear the perspectives I hold and provide insight into how I approach this work.

In my family, education was and still is seen as the great equalizer, and no sacrifice was too great in the pursuit of an education. So much so that during my early adolescence, my parents moved our entire family from one side of our island to the other in pursuit of better educational opportunities for the family–themselves included. I distinctly remember the time when every member of my family was actively working towards educational goals. I watched my mom return to the classroom as a non-traditional student to complete the bachelor's degree she started before I was born and then go on to earn a master's degree the same year I graduated high school. I remember seeing my dad come home from his full-time job only to turn around and burn the midnight oil as he too worked towards earning his MBA – both becoming the first in their families to earn graduate degrees.

Sacrifice in pursuit of education continued to shape my family's orientation to education. Following the successful completion of high school, my parents made financial and social sacrifices to afford all three of their children the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education in the United States at a time when the conversion rate of USD to JMD was $1 to $158, even though this meant our family had to live apart. I never truly understood it back then, but the way my parents valued education tremendously shaped my journey through undergraduate, graduate, and now doctoral studies and the development of my academic and personal identity.

I end this section with a metaphor that has continued to shape my identity. '*We likkle but we tallawah*', a common Jamaican saying that means we're a small nation, but we're strong-

willed and determined, and we refuse to be restrained by the boundaries of our tiny island. That's
the lesson I took with me as I boarded the plane to begin my collegiate studies in the United
States almost fifteen years ago. Fast forward to today, after studying and working in spaces
where as a Black Jamaican, I was both a racial and ethnic minority, that lesson has been tested in
ways I could have never expected. I am the eldest daughter of three children. Born and raised in
Jamaica in a middle-class family that deeply values education, and my motivation to do this
work comes from the realization that after almost two decades in these spaces, somewhere along
my journey, I briefly lost the '*tallawah*' and got stuck in the *'likkle'*.

I have big research questions that hit close to home, and to answer them, I'll have to
dissect a system that I, in part, credit for making me the scholar I am today. Battling issues of
invisibility and belonging while fighting imposter syndrome has long been the norm for
marginalized students, including myself, and I've seen the consequences first-hand. Because of
the identities I hold and my personal and professional experiences, I connect deeply with my
work and my participants. I understand their journeys and share in their struggle of navigating
hostile campus climates, so I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that my subjectivities and
biases may influence my participants' narratives. However, I, too, believe that these same
experiences will allow my participants to feel seen, heard, and understood, and my goal is that
through my own reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, my participants' stories will be as true
to their intended experiences as possible. I consider it a true honor to be a vessel for my
participants' stories and take great responsibility for the privilege of being able to amplify Black
voices at a time in our society where they are so often silenced, misunderstood, or weaponized.

Sample and Data Sources

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), "The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual materials) that will best help the researcher understand the problem or research question" (p. 262). The following section will explore this study's setting, the participants themselves, the strategies employed to recruit them, and the type of data to be collected.

Setting: The qualitative data collection was conducted at a large, public, research-intensive university located in the southeastern United States, known henceforth as Southern Large University (SU). Founded in the early 1800s, Southern Large University is home to roughly 26,082 students, including undergraduate and graduate students, with the student population being 52.8% White, 14% Asian, 6.92% Black or African American, 6.58% Hispanic or Latino, 4.75% two or more races, 0.0959% American Indian or Alaska Native, and the other 0.0537% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b).

As one of the twelve institutions to have participated in the quantitative phase of this study, Southern Large University has a complex history related to race and equity and a well-documented history of profiting from the institution of slavery (Martin et al., 2018). Though the institution's history of enslavement is not this study's main focus, authors have argued the vestiges of slavery continue to influence colleges' present-day campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1998), and recent research provides evidence to support that these histories impact the Black student experience (Garibay et al., 2020). Given the demonstrated connection between slavery's past and present campus climates, Southern Large University's setting provides a critical context for examining the experiences of Black students navigating

both academic and social life at a PWI and the perceived influence on their graduate degree aspirations.

Participants: The population being examined throughout this study are Southern Large University undergraduate students who identify as either Black or African American and were selected using purposive sampling procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants qualifying for the study were invited to participate in the interviews via e-mail. These students were identified in one of three ways: (1) through university contacts engaged in supporting marginalized college students, (2) through collaborating with student organizations or cultural centers, or (3) through recruitment flyers posted on student bulletin boards. Students who were interested in participating in this study were asked to complete a participant interest survey (see Appendix C) administered through Qualtrics where relevant demographic data (generation status, gender, academic major, etc.) was collected. To incentivize student participation, participants were offered a $25 gift card for participating in an interview.

Demographics: Each participant selected to participate in the interviews (1) self-identified as Black or African American and (2) was eighteen years or older. Given the racialized and cultural dimensions of this study, the sampling criteria ensured participants could speak to their racialized pre-college and college experiences that influenced their academic trajectories. My ideal sample size was between 10 and 15 participants, both first- and continuing-generation students, representing a variety of academic disciplines and class years. In total, 11 Southern Large University undergraduate students, ranging from first-year freshmen to fourth-year seniors and representing numerous academic disciplines, were interviewed for this project. See Table 4 for more detailed participant demographics.

Table 4. Participant demographics and graduate degree aspirations

Participant	Gender	Racial Identity	Generation Status	Undergraduate Major	Class Year	Graduate Degree Aspiration
Mimi	Cisgender Woman	African American	Continuing-Generation	Youth & Social Innovation	Third-Year/Junior	Master's (Undecided)
Monica	Cisgender Woman	African American	First-Generation	Youth & Social Innovation	Fourth-Year/Senior	PhD
Siena	Cisgender Woman	African	First-Generation	Kinesiology	Third-Year/Junior	Master's (MSPA)
Abigail	Cisgender Woman	Sub-Saharan African	First-Generation	Global Studies	Third-Year/Junior	Professional Doctorate (JD)
Catherine	Cisgender Woman	African American	Continuing-Generation	Special Education	Fourth-Year/Senior	Master's (MEd)
Susan	Cisgender Woman	African American and Southeast Asian	Continuing-Generation	Commerce	Fourth-Year/Senior	Master's (MSA)
Paula	Cisgender Woman	African American	First-Generation	Commerce	Fourth-Year/Senior	Master's (Undecided)
Britt	Cisgender Woman	Sub-Saharan African	Continuing-Generation	Cognitive Science and Global Public Health	Second-Year/Sophomore	Medical Doctorate (MD)
Lysandra	Cisgender Woman	African American	First-Generation	Global Public Health and Psychology	Third-Year/Junior	Master's (MPH)
Montel	Cisgender man	African American	Continuing-generation	Undeclared (Youth and Social Innovation intended)	First-Year/Freshman	Master's (MPP)
Bianca	Cisgender woman	African American	First-generation	Media Studies	Third-Year/Junior	Professional Doctorate (JD)

Data Collection: IRB approval for interview data collection was obtained on December 9, 2024, and interviews began on December 19, 2024, and culminated on January 31, 2025. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, which included ten interview questions grouped into relevant themes as influenced by the literature on Black students' graduate degree aspirations (see Appendix B). Interviews were conducted over Zoom, and each student participated in a single interview, which lasted approximately 90 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim using Zoom's transcription services. Post-interview, transcripts were quality checked against respective audio recordings, and once transcripts were reviewed to ensure accuracy, the audio recordings were then deleted per IRB participant confidentiality protocols. Final interview transcripts were then uploaded to the Dedoose software for analysis.

Informed Consent: Participants who indicated interest in participating in the study were provided with an information sheet that provided a detailed explanation of the study, its goals, and procedures, including anticipated time commitment and potential risks. Participants were also informed that their participation in the present study was completely voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time, at which time their data would be removed from the analysis and destroyed. Verbal consent was then collected at the time of interview scheduling, and only students who consented participated in an interview.

There were minimal risks associated with this study. However, participants were asked about their racial experiences at Southern Large University and to reflect on bias-related incidents and microaggressions they may have experienced, possibly leading to a negative experience and potentially causing anger. Studies show that mindful meditation reduces stress and anxiety in college students (Bamber & Kraenzle Schneider, 2016) , so to minimize risks, I

began and ended each interview with a mindful minute breathing exercise to help prepare

participants for the session and provide an opportunity at the end to release any tension that may

have been building as they reflected on their racialized experiences. In addition, due to the

sensitive nature of the questioning, which would require vulnerability on the part of my

participants, interview questions were asked in a respectful, sensitive, and approachable manner.

Sample interview questions include: "Have you had an experience on campus where you thought

your race or ethnicity affected how you were perceived or how you were treated? If so, talk to

me about that experience and how you navigated that encounter" and "Based on your academic

and social experiences on campus, are you interested in pursuing graduate school at this or any

other institution post-graduation? Why or why not? (see Appendix B for the complete interview

protocol). Upon completion of their interview session, participants were emailed a resource sheet

that included a list of student support resources (academic, mental, and physical health, etc.)

available to them at Southern Large University and the surrounding community.

Confidentiality: Audio-recorded interviews and subsequent interview transcripts were

handled confidentially. Data consisted of participants' recorded responses to interview questions,

and Zoom's transcription software was used to transcribe recorded interview sessions. Once the

interview transcripts were quality-checked against associated audio recordings for accuracy, the

audio recordings were destroyed. Participants were randomly assigned a pseudonym associated

with their transcription and identifiers (e.g., participant name, email address), and the associated

ID numbers are stored in a password-protected file separated from the transcribed interview.

Analytic Strategy

Data Analysis: According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative data analysis is a

"process that requires sequential steps to be followed, from the specific to the general, and

involving multiple levels of analysis" (p. 268) and the authors then go on to outline the five steps involved in qualitative data analysis: (1) organize and prepare the data for analysis, (2) read or look at all the data, (3) start coding all of the data, (4) generate a description and themes, (5) representing the description and themes.

With the above-outlined steps in mind, after the interview data was collected, I began the analysis by reviewing and cleaning the transcripts. Next, I more closely reviewed the transcripts and categorized the data to identify any relevant patterns in my participants' responses, and the third step involved the creation of specific codes. Coding, as outlined in Creswell and Creswell (2018), "involves taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often based in the actual language of the participant" (p. 269). Once preliminary codes were developed, they were used to further categorize participants' responses while identifying emergent themes to be analyzed across each case. In the event that subcategories emerged through data aggregation, they were identified and coded as well. Finally, data is reported using thematic analysis to limit the identification of individual participant comments, and themes are represented with the use of narrative passages to convey the findings of the analysis.

In alignment with the parallel convergent mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), the integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation phase of the study. After both stands of the data were analyzed separately, the findings were compared and synthesized to identify points of convergence and divergence. Specifically, statistical trends that emerged from the quantitative analysis were examined alongside the qualitative themes to provide a more nuanced understanding of Black students' graduate degree aspirations. This approach allowed for the validation of findings through

triangulation while also offering deeper insights into the lived experiences that may not have

been fully captured through survey data alone. By integrating these findings, this study provided

a holistic understanding of how community cultural wealth and racialized experiences and

emotions intersected to inform Black students' pathways toward graduate education.

Establishing Credibility

Validity: Validity in qualitative research, which is considered to be one of the strengths

of qualitative work, involves researchers checking the accuracy of their findings, whereas

reliability refers to the consistency of the researchers' approach across the field of study

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The authors go on to list several methods for validating the

findings from qualitative research, but the two techniques to be used in the present study are (1)

clarifying researcher bias and (2) providing rich, thick descriptions.

Clarifying researcher bias requires an open and honest narrative to be written by the

researcher that outlines "how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background"

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 274). The process of providing rich descriptions of a research

setting or theme through narrative writing is another benefit of qualitative research, which allows

for findings and results to "become more realistic" to readers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.

274). Utilizing the above-mentioned procedures as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018)

should add validity to this study's findings.

Research Permission and Ethical Considerations

In compliance with the regulations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), permission

for conducting research was obtained prior to any data collection or analysis, and ethical issues

were addressed at each phase of the present study. IRB approval for survey administration and

data collection for the quantitative phase of this study was obtained in the Fall of 2023, and IRB

approval for the qualitative interviews was received on December 9, 2024.

Quantitative Phase

All students enrolled in the survey were given a consent form that outlined the potential

risks and benefits of participating in the study and their rights as participants and a statement

requesting their informed consent was issued before they were able to proceed to the actual

Qualtrics survey. All survey participants were 18 years of age or older, were neither deceived nor

had information about the study withheld from them, and there was no limitation on their ability

to consent to participating in the study. Participants were randomly assigned a participant ID

number associated with their survey and identifiers (e.g. participant name, participant email

addresses) and the associated ID number are kept in a password-protected file.

Qualitative Phase

During recruitment, participants were provided with an information sheet that gave a

detailed explanation of the study, its goals, and procedures, including anticipated time

commitment and potential risks. Participants were instructed to review the information sheet, and

verbal consent was given at the time of interview scheduling. Only students who consented were

able to participate in an interview. All participants were 18 years of age or older, were neither

deceived nor had information about the study withheld from them, and there was no limitation on

their ability to consent to participate in the study. Data from the interviews consisted of

participants' voice-recorded responses to interview questions, and voice-recorded transcripts of

the interviews were uploaded to a password-protected file only accessible to the primary

investigator. After completion of the interview, identifying information (e.g., participant names,

participant email addresses) was removed. The audio recordings were transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature, and once checked against audio recordings for accuracy, the recordings were destroyed. Participants were randomly assigned a pseudonym associated with their transcription. Identifiers (e.g., participant name, participant email addresses) and the associated ID number will be kept in a password-protected file separated from the transcribed interview.

Summary

This chapter achieved four key objectives. First, it revisited the overarching aims of this project and restated the research questions that guide this study. Second, it provided a detailed explanation of the convergence parallel mixed methods approach employed to address those questions. Third, I outlined my role as a researcher and acknowledged the potential biases and personal perspectives that may shape my analysis. Finally, the chapter discussed the ethical considerations and permissions required for conducting this research. Together, these elements establish a strong foundation for the analysis and interpretation of the findings in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 4: QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

In this chapter, I present findings from the quantitative phase of this study and introduce the multinomial logistic regression model for Black students' graduate degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate (n=556). In the following chapter, I present the results from the thematic analysis of Southern Large University student interviews (n=11). Together, these results provide a snapshot of the unique factors contributing to Black students' degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, followed by an in-depth thematic description of the impact of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions on undergraduate experience and graduate degree aspirations as described by my participants.

Results of Multinomial Logistic Regression

Research Question 1

What forms of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions are associated with the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending PWIs?

Table 5. Multinomial Logistic Regression Results for Graduate Degree Aspirations Among Black Students

Variables	Master's			PhD			Professional/Medical Doctorate		
	b	SE	Exp(b)	b	SE	Exp(b)	b	SE	Exp(b)
Background Characteristics									
Cisgender woman (cisman ref.)	0.272	0.248	1.313	0.618	0.372	1.855	0.667*	0.285	1.950
Trans / gender expansive (cisman ref.)	0.999	0.671	2.718	2.644***	0.736	14.063	1.376*	0.711	3.957
Medium income (low-income ref.)	0.383	0.318	1.467	-0.272	0.425	0.762	0.424	0.353	1.526
High income (low-income ref.)	0.808*	0.366	2.244	-0.003	0.486	0.998	0.447	0.407	1.563
First Generation (continuing-gen ref.)	-0.234	0.266	0.977	-0.740*	0.383	0.477	-0.285	0.293	0.752
Community Cultural Wealth									
Racial comp of pre-college social networks	0.061	0.168	1.063	0.466*	0.234	1.594	-0.181	0.183	0.835
Racial socialization	0.047	0.192	1.048	0.113	0.280	1.120	0.042	0.210	1.043
Social change orientation	-0.053	0.171	0.948	0.127	0.246	1.135	0.410*	0.196	1.507
Racialized Emotions									
Black joy	0.345**	0.135	1.411	0.287	0.187	1.332	0.349*	0.149	1.417
Emotional response to slavery	0.188	0.147	1.206	0.417*	0.194	1.517	0.145	0.157	1.156
Institutional / Academic Experiences									
Faculty Support	0.058	0.117	1.060	0.412*	0.167	1.511	0.072	0.129	1.074
Racialized Classroom Experiences	0.226	0.125	1.253	0.006	0.175	1.006	0.278*	0.140	1.320
Racial Microaggressions	-0.028	0.167	0.972	0.213	0.225	1.237	0.057	0.180	1.059
STEM (Non-STEM ref.)	0.419	0.231	1.521	1.037**	0.327	2.822	0.693**	0.254	1.999
Structural Characteristics									
Private (public ref.)	-0.498	0.304	0.608	-0.469	0.428	0.625	-0.032	0.313	0.968
High research activity (arts and science focus ref.)	-0.439	0.727	0.645	-1.143	0.784	0.319	-0.067	0.728	0.935
Very high research activity (arts and science focus ref.)	-0.580	0.672	0.560	-1.675*	0.723	0.187	-0.680	0.682	0.506

Note. STEM = science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
Exp(b) = odds ratio
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 5 presents the results from the multinomial logistic regression that explored the background characteristics, community cultural wealth racialized emotions, institutional contexts, structural characteristics, academic, and faculty support factors associated with predicting Black students' degree aspirations. Several variables from the above-mentioned categories were found to be predictive of students' aspirations to earn an advanced degree, particularly for PhDs and professional doctorates, key findings are summarized below for each advanced degree compared with a bachelor's degree.

Master's Versus Bachelor's

Background Characteristics – Family Income

Few individual characteristics were associated with predicting degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. However, family income significantly predicted degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, where the relative log odds of aspiring to a master's degree vs. a bachelor's degree increases by .808 if moving from the lowest level of family income to the highest level of family income, and the odds ratio of students from high-income families where parents earned between $100,00 - $500,000 a year aspiring for a master's degree versus a bachelor's degree is 2.244 times that of students from low-income families where parents make less than $15,000 to $29,000 a year. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a master's degree, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 24% for students from high-income families compared to students from low-income families.

Racialized Emotions – Black Joy

Students' racialized emotions in the form of Black Joy were also significantly associated with graduate degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. A one-unit increase in Black Joy is

associated with a .345 increase in the relative log odds of aspiring for a master's degree vs. a

bachelor's degree, and the odds ratio for a one-unit increase in Black Joy is 1.411 for aspiring for

a master's degree versus a bachelor's degree. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a master's

degree, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 41% for each one-unit increase in the

black joy score.

PhD Versus Bachelor's

Background Characteristics – Gender

Student's gender identity significantly predicted degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, where the relative log odds of aspiring to a PhD versus a bachelor's degree increases by 2.644 for students who identify as trans/gender-expansive compared to cis-gender students and the odds ratio of trans/gender-expansive students aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's degree is 14.063 times that of cis-gender students. In other words, the expected risk of the highest degree a student aspires to being a bachelor's degree compared to a PhD is *lower* for trans/gender-expansive students.

Background Characteristics – Generation Status

Students' generation status also significantly predicted degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, where the relative log odds of aspiring to a PhD versus a bachelor's degree decreased by .740 for first-generation students compared to their continuing-generation peers and the odds ratio of first-generation students aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's degree decreased by .478 when compared to their continuing-generation peers. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a PhD, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, decrease by 48% for first-generation students compared to their continuing-generation peers.

Community Cultural Social Capital – Racial Composition

Referencing Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model, Black students' social capital as it relates to the racial composition of their neighborhood, high school, friends, and teachers in school, was associated with aspirations to earn a PhD. A one-unit increase in racial composition is associated with a .466 increase in the relative log odds of aspiring for a PhD

versus a bachelor's degree, and the odds ratio for a one-unit increase in racial composition is

1.594 for aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's degree. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a

PhD, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 59% for each one-unit increase in the

racial composition score.

Racialized Emotions – Emotional Response to Slavery

Students' racialized emotions in the form of their emotional response to their institution's

history of enslavement were also significantly associated with graduate degree aspirations

beyond the baccalaureate. A one-unit increase in students' emotional slavery response is

associated with a .417 increase in the relative log odds of aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's

degree, and the odds ratio for a one-unit increase in emotional slavery response is 1.517 for

aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's degree. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a PhD,

rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 52% for each one-unit increase in the emotional

response to slavery score.

Structural Characteristics – Institution Level

Few structural characteristics were associated with predicting degree aspirations beyond

the baccalaureate. An institution's level of research activity (institution level) significantly

predicted degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, where the relative log odds of aspiring to

a PhD versus a bachelor's degree decrease by 1.675 for students who attend institutions with

very high research activity (R1) compared to students who attend baccalaureate colleges with

arts and science focus. Additionally, the odds ratio of students attending institutions with very

high research activity aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's degree is .187 times less than

students who attend baccalaureate colleges. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a PhD, rather

than stopping at a bachelor's, decrease by 19% for students attending institutions with very high research activity compared to students attending arts and science-focused institutions.

Institutional and Academic Experiences – STEM Major

Students' academic major was also significantly associated with predicting degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. Students majoring in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines significantly predicted degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, where the relative log odds of aspiring to a PhD versus a Bachelor's degree increase by 1.037 for students majoring in a STEM discipline compared to non-STEM majors. The odds ratio of students majoring in a STEM discipline aspiring for a PhD versus a Bachelor's degree is 2.821 times greater than non-STEM majors. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a PhD, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 82% for students majoring in a STEM discipline compared to students not majoring in a STEM discipline.

Institutional and Academic Experiences – Perceived Faculty Support

The support students receive from faculty members was also shown to significantly predict degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. A one-unit increase in students' perceived support from faculty is associated with a .412 increase in the relative log odds of aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's degree, and the odds ratio for a one-unit increase in faculty support is 1.517 times greater for aspiring for a PhD versus a bachelor's degree. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a PhD, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 52% for each one-unit increase in the faculty support score.

Professional or Medical Doctorate Versus Bachelor's

Background Characteristics – Gender

Students' gender identity significantly predicted degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, where the relative log odds of aspiring to a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree increased by .667 and 1.376 for students who identify as cisgender women and trans/gender-expansive, respectively, compared to cisgender men. The odds ratio of cisgender women and trans/gender-expansive students aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree is 1.949 and 3.957 times greater, respectively, than that of students who identify as cisgender men. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 94% and 95% for cisgender women and trans/gender-expansive students respectively.

Community Cultural Resistance Capital – Social Change Orientation

Referencing Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model, Black students' resistance capital as it relates to their commitment to social justice was associated with aspirations to earn a professional or medical doctorate. A one-unit increase in students' social change orientation is associated with a .410 increase in the relative log odds of aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree, and the odds ratio for a one-unit increase in social change orientation is 1.507 for aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 51% for each one-unit increase in the social change orientation score.

Racialized Emotions – Black Joy

Students' racialized emotions in the form of Black Joy were again significantly associated with graduate degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. A one-unit increase in Black Joy is associated with a .349 increase in the relative log odds of aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree, and the odds ratio for a one-unit increase in Black Joy is 1.417 for aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 42% for each one-unit increase in the black joy score.

Racialized Experiences – Negative Racialized Classroom Experiences

One institutional context measuring campus racial climate, racialized classroom experiences, was found to significantly predict graduate degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. A one-unit increase in students' racialized classroom experience is associated with a .278 increase in the relative log odds of aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree, and the odds ratio for a one-unit increase in racialized classroom experiences is 1.320 for aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree. In other words, the odds of aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 32% for each one-unit increase in the negative racialized classroom experiences score.

Institutional and Academic Experiences – STEM Major

Students' academic major was again significantly associated with predicting degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. Students majoring in STEM disciplines significantly

predicted degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate, where the relative log odds of aspiring to

a professional or medical doctorate versus a bachelor's degree increases by .693 for students

majoring in a STEM discipline compared to non-STEM majors. The odds ratio of students

majoring in a STEM discipline aspiring for a professional or medical doctorate versus a

bachelor's degree is 2 times greater than non-STEM majors. In other words, the odds of aspiring

for a professional or medical doctorate, rather than stopping at a bachelor's, increases by 99% for

STEM majors compared to non-STEM majors.

Quantitative Summary

The results of the multinomial logistic regression indicate that several forms of

community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions are associated with

the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending PWIs. Three forms of community

cultural wealth were included in the analytic model; familial capital, measured by students' racial

socialization, social capital, in the form of the racial composition of students' pre-college

communities, and resistance capital, captured by students' orientation to social change. Of the

three community cultural wealth measures tested, two were found to be predictive of students'

aspirations for degrees beyond the baccalaureate; racial composition, and social change

orientation.

Of the two measures of campus racial climate, which served as the institutional

experiences investigated in this analysis, one was found to be predictive of Black students'

degree aspirations beyond the baccalaureate. Racialized classroom experiences, captured by

students' racialized experiences in the classroom, such as feelings of tokenism, were found to

significantly predict Black students' desire to obtain a professional or medical doctorate

compared to a bachelor's degree. In line with the influence of racialized experiences on graduate

degree aspirations, racialized emotions were also found to be predictive of Black students' graduate degree aspirations. The first measure of Black students' racialized emotions tested in the model, emotional response to slavery, was significantly associated with increased odds of aspiring for a PhD.

Lastly, the second racialized emotions construct investigated in the model, Black joy was significantly associated with Black students' graduate degree aspirations at the master's and professional or medical doctorate level. This finding indicates that Black students who report experiencing increased levels of joy, pleasure, and feeling loved and cared for during their undergraduate tenure, have increased odds of aspiring for degrees beyond the baccalaureate, which has significant implications for supporting Black students' graduate degree aspirations.

CHAPTER 5: QUALITATIVE RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the results from the thematic analysis of Southern Large University student interviews (n=11).

Results of the Thematic Analysis

Research Question 2

How do Black students attending PWIs describe the impact of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions on their undergraduate experience and graduate degree aspirations?

I open the discussion of qualitative findings with a presentation of the three distinct themes that emerged from the data, followed by an in-depth exploration of how students' intersectional identities shaped their undergraduate experiences and graduate degree aspirations.

Emergent Themes

Three distinct themes emerged from the data: 1) acceptance and inclusion, 2) experiences with racism, and 3) resilience through support. The first theme, **acceptance and inclusion**, revealed students' desire for acceptance, with participants expressing difficulty finding spaces on campus where they felt fully accepted rather than simply tolerated. **Experiences with racism and institutional barriers** was another theme that emerged as participants discussed their encounters with racism, microaggressions, and exclusion in their classrooms and on campus, which contributed to feelings of imposter syndrome and mental health struggles. The final theme, **navigational support and resilience through social networks**, emerged as a strong motivator for students' persistence and graduate aspirations, with students sharing how familial, social, and professional networks provided critical support and resources whereby assisting students navigate structural barriers and challenge inequality. Taken together, these findings

highlight the challenges and sources of resilience that shape Black Southern Large University

students' educational trajectories and suggest that their experiences are intricately shaped by

their intersectional identities.

Acceptance and Inclusion

Beyond being tolerated. One of the most salient themes that emerged from the data was

students' desire to be accepted and included in their academic and social environments on

campus. Of particular note was students' distinction between holistic acceptance versus being

tolerated, which motivated them to seek inclusive and affirming spaces on campus where they

were *seen*. Participants spoke of their ongoing struggles to feel accepted on a PWI, with one

participant sharing that those struggles began on day one during her orientation.

Mimi, a third-year continuing-generation student who came to SU from a low-income,

predominantly Black community, recalled the first time she felt the need to "perform" around her

peers. She explained:

> I would say it was just hard because I didn't see…a lot of people who looked like me, but
> also, a lot of people don't understand what it meant to come from a lower-income
> neighborhood and to go to an unaccredited high school. I know I'm not the only one to have
> had that experience at Southern Large University. There are plenty of other people who
> have probably had similar experiences, but during orientation, when it came to that initial
> process of being a first year and trying to meet people and talk to people and form
> friendships, it just kind of seemed like…I don't know…no one really understood me and
> then I couldn't participate in the slang or the lingo…I couldn't be my authentic self in those
> spaces. So, I always kind of felt like I was performing.

In her account of the first few days at Southern Large University, Mimi mentioned

feeling as though she needed to perform in order to be accepted by her peers, and when asked to

expand on what it meant to perform for her peers and how it influenced her sense of belonging

on campus, she explained:

> Belonging means I wouldn't have to perform and that would be okay. Like I can be my authentic self, whether that be embracing the full parts of my culture or embracing just being my full self, and that not be a problem. I don't know…people really don't have to understand it but it's just still accepted.

This expressed desire to be accepted fully was echoed by other participants, with participants using words like "wholeheartedly" and "unconditionally" to describe acceptance in its fullest sense. In addition to participants' desire to be seen and accepted for who they are, one participant made particular reference to not only being accepted in social spaces, but also having their experiences and opinions valued in the classroom. She shared:

> For me, [belonging] basically means being yourself… like just being you and people accepting you for yourself and then also having your opinions matter… where whatever you say people take it into consideration and they don't just ignore you because they feel like you're less than or like you're not fit to be in that type of space. Say in the classroom a Black student wanting to say something, and a white student also wanting to say something, sometimes it feels like professors think it's more important for the white student to speak other than me speaking because it feels like they know better or they can say something better than what I have to say.

Siena, a third-year first-generation immigrant majoring in Kinesiology, expressed concerns about Black students' insights not being valued in the same way as their white peers in the classroom, emphasizing that true acceptance must go beyond being tolerated and requires being valued equally. These very sentiments were at the heart of the Black Liberation movement for education, as Black students and activists fought for not only access to learn alongside their white peers but also demanded an education system that understood their unique experiences and valued their intellectual contributions (Biondi, 2012).

True acceptance elicits joy. Another element of acceptance that became apparent as students described what it meant to be accepted on campus and its impact on their experience was the connection between acceptance in the fullest sense and students' experiences of joy. Britt, a second-year continuing-generation child of immigrants majoring in cognitive science and

global public health, shared that, "I feel like being accepted means not necessarily fitting in, because I don't really fit in, I like to stand out in my own unique way…" The literature on student belonging highlights the importance of students feeling like part of their campus community "just the way they are" and "not having to conform" (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023, p. 823), a distinction made clear through my participants' desire for wholehearted and unconditional acceptance just as they are.

Acceptance in the fullest sense was linked to participants' experiences with and expressions of joy, where Black joy was often defined in terms of participants' ability to embrace and celebrate their Black culture. Mimi shared:

> Black joy personally is the happiness I get when I think about black culture and I think about being in black spaces and being surrounded by my people and my culture. Black culture is just so beautiful…the art, the culture…everything about black culture just brings me joy and I think that's how I define it…. just the joy I get from being in black spaces, being surrounded by Black culture and talking to black people.

Abigail echoed these sentiments and added the element of pride to her definition of Black joy, where true joy came from being in spaces where she was unashamed of, and loved for her blackness:

> Black joy is defined by love… I think it's being who you are, being confident in your identity, and being able to be loved in that… that's how I understand and see black joy… I think it's just embracing who I am, honestly. I think it's easy to let other people define who you and say you have to be this person and this is the way to live your life. So I think Black joy is living proudly as a black woman, just unashamed of who I am…

Adding to the list of words used to describe how Black students desire to be accepted on campus, like "unconditionally", "wholeheartedly", and "unashamed" when describing expressions of Black joy, Catherine offered "unapologetic":

> Black joy is unapologetic joy. Unapologetically you in all your blackness. Things that you enjoy, things that you can share with other people without feeling any type of shame or feeling weird or like the oddball out and just voicing exactly what you like and what you want to do without feeling criticized or anything like that. Just being a hundred percent you

and true to you. I think that is true black joy because I feel like you can't experience true
black joy if you have this cloud of criticism hanging over you or constantly wondering
what are they going to think or what are they going to assume… No, black joy erases all
of that and it's just you getting to do exactly what you want to do.

As described by my participants, true acceptance meant the freedom to embrace full parts of

themselves and their culture. Where, despite their marginalized identities and feeling as though

at times their identities were in stark contrast to what was often valued in their social and

academic environments on campus, true acceptance is unconditional, wholehearted, unashamed,

unapologetic, and elicits joy.

Intersectional acceptance. The universal need for acceptance and inclusion rang true for

all participants in this study, with each participant relaying the impact of diverse and affirming

communities on their educational trajectories. Though many of my participants initially struggled

with feeling out of place at their PWI, most shared that they found acceptance in diverse spaces,

often through student organizations and cultural groups that catered to their unique intersectional

identities. Through interviews and demographic questionnaire responses, students described their

identities in terms of race, generation status, sexuality, gender, class, and religious affiliation,

highlighting that though racially homogenous, their quest for acceptance was influenced by their

diverse and intersectional identities.

Siena, originally from Sierra Leone, moved to the United States a little over three years

ago and described immense pride in her cultural background. She spoke of how her identity as

not just a Black woman but also an immigrant on campus, informed her campus involvement and

desire for inclusive spaces. When describing the spaces she felt most accepted, she recalled her

involvement with a cultural club on campus. She shared:

I feel like I do belong there for sure because there are like a lot of other international
students there and I feel like the space is very safe for you to be yourself, express yourself,

and talk about your culture and things like that, which is basically something that we do over there. So yeah, I feel very confident and I feel very safe talking because I feel like nobody judges me about having an accent or anything like that and also where I'm from I tend to talk about my culture because everybody [in the club] also has different cultures because they are coming from different parts of the world… so yeah that's like one of the places where I feel very safe.

Highlighting how the intersection of race and sexuality informs students' experiences on

campus, Mimi spoke of her engagement with a Black queer club on campus. She explained:

Knowing that there are spaces for people that highlight my black identity but like also highlight the intersectionality like black queer club I'm just so thankful that those spaces at Southern Large University exist because I don't know how I would be if those spaces didn't exist. I would probably be a lot more miserable if those spaces didn't exist. I think it's really important to be in a community with people who look like you and who are experiencing similar things. It's validating sources to just reinforce that I'm not crazy…other people are having these experiences too so it definitely has just made my time at Southern Large University a lot better and a lot more positive.

The above examples depict how Black Southern Large University students found

community and acceptance amongst peers who shared their intersectional marginalized

identities, however, not every participant was able to find community within their

marginalization. Monica, who identifies as a low-income first-generation student, shared how her

multiple marginalized identities made it difficult to feel accepted within the Black community on

campus. She shared:

I come from a low-income background, and I feel like oftentimes there's an assumption that because we're at Southern Large University, we're well off and we have resources and opportunities and this that and third and I feel like that's been the reality for a lot of like students of color, specifically Black students that I've met. And not to say that we don't mesh, but I just think that I feel out of place sometimes within the black community at Southern Large University.

Feeling out of place engaging with the Southern Large University community while

living at the intersection of three marginalized identities, race, generation status, and

socioeconomic status, was also echoed by Lysandra who, as a first-generation low-income

student, described coming into an awareness of her marginalized identities during her first year on campus. She shared:

> Throughout my first year, I think it just became so much more salient to me how I was first-generation and low-income. Like I was aware, obviously, when I was applying [to Southern Large University] it's like, oh, if you're first-gen, like do this, do that… so I was like, okay, I do have this title but I don't feel like I knew what it meant or how it felt to be first-gen low-income until I came here to Southern Large University. I think first year I never fully understood it. I don't think I could vocalize it or like word it very well, but umm I just fell into a bit of a depression and didn't know why… I think I really figured it out like second year… I felt very alone in my struggles… I didn't feel like the people around me could relate….

The presented findings highlight that how students from marginalized backgrounds engage with their campus and academic environments is influenced by the different intersections of their identities. Even further, Black students' desire to be seen and accepted, and the spaces in which they find such acceptance, is also influenced by their intersectional identities, with students expressing comfort and safety in spaces that cater to their full selves.

Experiences with Racism and Institutional Barriers

Campus racial climate. Southern Large University, as previously discussed, has a documented history of enslavement, where some of its most notable infrastructure was built from the exploitation of enslaved laborers and named after their enslavers (Martin et al., 2018). With today's student population becoming increasingly more diverse, researchers have warned of the threats institutions' enslavement histories, among other elements of a campus' racial climate, to Black students' experiences and outcomes (Garibay et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2012; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). To better understand this dynamic and its influence on Black students' graduate aspirations, participants were asked about their perceptions of their campus' racial climate and their experiences with racism, discrimination, and exclusion at Southern Large University.

Students' experiences with racism and discrimination ranged from subtle

microaggressions to blatant acts of violence. Participants spoke of their perceptions of

microaggressive behaviors in academic spaces, with one participant, a first-generation fourth-

year senior majoring in Commerce, recalling an experience with a classmate who singled her out

and questioned her understanding of course instructions. Paula shared:

> So I was… in a group project and we were talking about consulting because we were asked
> to form a consulting team. It was like a business Spanish class because that's my minor,
> and we had to do a consulting firm or pitch, and a group member asked me, do you know
> what a consulting firm is? and I feel like that was kind of a microaggression… and I feel
> like he wouldn't have said that to me if I weren't black and a woman. Specifically, because
> the other group member was also a white male…

When asked to elaborate on how that encounter impacted her experience in the class, she

responded with:

> I guess I felt just… disrespected because I definitely know what a consulting firm is. I'm
> in the Commerce School that's a target agency for most commerce students. So I think
> reflecting back it still kind of is insulting to my intelligence because in that class, I
> participated a lot, I spearheaded a lot of things in that class, and in that project as well. I
> got the whole group moving at first and I think it demoralized me after so I wasn't as
> enthusiastic about the project or contributing to it, but today, I can look back and even
> though it was a bad event, I think that's important that [Black students] take up certain
> spaces in those arenas… I guess that's just going to help us enter those spaces and claim
> our place if that makes sense because others don't think that we belong at times

Participants also reported experiences with blatant acts of racism on campus, with one

student describing being assaulted by members of a fraternity. Monica recalled:

> I was with my friend and she has a car and we had parked...I guess we weren't supposed to park there… but it was near one of the frat houses and they literally threw rocks at our heads…. they threw stones at us.

When asked to share the events that followed, Monica recalled seeking assistance from

university security and was met with indifference:

> …after that, we went to go tell one of the security guards that are around campus and they were like there's nothing we can do… and it's like, are you serious? They just threw pebbles that hurt. Is that not endangerment or assault or something like there's nothing that you can do? No, there's nothing we can do.

Unfortunately, this was not the only example of perceived racism or indifference by

university law and safety enforcement officers. Monica shared another experience with

university safety officers that jeopardized her physical safety. During her second year as a

Southern Large University student, Monica recalled the moment the campus was placed under

lockdown due to an active shooting event that claimed the lives of three of her classmates. She

recalled:

> My second year was the shooting, and that was my school trip that it happened on, but I was feeling well, so I didn't go on the trip, but a lot of my friends… they were on the bus and they saw everything happen… I was dog sitting my friend's dog and my phone was broken, so I wasn't able to get any of the [emergency response] text alerts or anything and I was outside while it was happening…walking the dog. I saw many, many police officers and not one of them told me anything that was going on, to go inside, that you're not supposed to be there, nothing. My friend... she ended up getting in contact with me and was like, you need to be inside… There's an active shooter. He was in my building. It was a lot. He was in my building! I called my mother. I was running, locking doors, closing the blinds. He was on my floor like they had the police scanner on and I could hear he's in [participant's building]. He's on the first floor. I was like, I'm on the first floor. Like, let me get to the elevator. Let me go up the steps, whatever. So it was a lot, a lot, a lot during that time and I had ended up speaking with….because I wasn't sure if it was university police or just Charlottesville police, so I had ended up speaking with… I forgot his name… but I think he was like the head of the university police and he just brushed it off like, oh, I'm so sorry that happened. We're going to write a report…. And it's like, is that not their job to…to keep their students safe? You could have told me like you're not supposed to be outside at this time, we're investing...something, um so I feel like stuff like that… they really did not care for my safety for my well-being and I didn't go outside for a long time after that. I was just very, very traumatized.

90

Monica's experiences with campus law and safety enforcement officers and their perceived indifference for her safety negatively impacted her mental health and her trust in university law and safety officers. Montel, a continuing-generation first-year student with plans to major in youth and social innovation, recalled the moment he felt discriminated against by a university safety officer while attempting to visit a café in an on-campus museum. He shared:

> I've been going back and forth between justifying it in my head and… you know, not justifying it but there was a time where I was on central campus looking for a new food place to try and there was a cafe inside of the art museum or like outside of the art museum and I didn't know where it was I was just, you know, it said like inside the inside the art museum and I wasn't quite sure where it was so I walk in and I walked past the… I should probably preface this by saying I was wearing a black hoodie and black sweatpants, and I was walking past whoever the security person was, and it didn't really look like a formal museum when you walked in…I thought wherever the place was might have been on another floor so I walked past the security guard…I didn't know he was security, and he was like, where are you going? You think you can just walk wherever you want? and I was sort of going back and forth, sort of had to like laugh it off and sort of diffuse the situation. In hindsight, it probably could have been a lot worse but…

> So as I was walking out I realized that I was in the wrong place so I just walked out and I was like, okay, I'm not going back there again. And that's the whole area where the music department is, the arts, and also where the frat houses are. And I'm like, do I ever want to go back in that same area and potentially be subject to the same thing? Even though I was just trying to try something new or explore.

The above excerpts speak to Black students' experiences with racism, microaggressive behavior, and perceptions of their campus' racial climate, and a sub-category that has emerged from this theme is the impact these experiences have on Black students' well-being and experiences of joy.

Racialized emotions and student well-being. The second dimension of students' experiences with racism and institutional barriers that emerged from the data is the impact hostile campus racial climates have on students' mental health and well-being. Mimi recalled the moment she was called a racial slur while on campus and the incidents' subsequent influence on her mental well-being:

> I was walking from where I used to work last year, late at night, and at a red light, two people called me a slur, spit, and then drove off…so that was not fun and pretty traumatizing… It caught me off guard because I was just confused… I thought because the light was red they were slowing down…I thought something was wrong or that I was in danger or something, and then, they called me the slur and then the light turned green and they drove off or whatever. I was just confused. And then I processed what happened so, like, I'm freaking out I'm like, am I in danger? Like, what is going on? So I immediately called my grandma, I called my mom, I called my family and alerted them to what just happened, and they called me an Uber and I went back to my dorm…that really affected me like really bad…later that week I had to go to the hospital…I don't know if I should say this… I already had like mental health problems and that really made it worse… I was like, oh, I don't really feel like I belong and I ended up having to be hospitalized after that, it was very…hard. It was very traumatizing…because I've never had …that never outwardly happened to me.

Mimi's experience with what she described as outward racism while walking on campus impacted not only her mental health, but also the way she engaged academically and socially on campus. She recalled:

> It was very hard. I definitely kind of just shut down. I stopped my academics… I stopped going to class… it ...was not good…I also stopped interacting with people socially as well…it was bad. I did end up reaching out to our professors about my mental health…they were really helpful in that regard but… it was just hard to engage and be present in academic spaces because again, I felt like I didn't belong and it was like just hard.

When asked if the incident impacted her desire for graduate school, and if she would consider attending graduate school at Southern Large University, Mimi shared that her academic and social experiences on campus reaffirmed her desire to pursue graduate school but not at Southern Large University:

> Being here at [Southern Large University] there's just a lot of things that happen at home that I'm not present for and I feel like after graduation, I just need to be closer to home to help support my family… I've had some positive experiences at Southern Large University and some of them not so positive… [the state] is really nice but I just… I don't know. I think…the more I think about what I want to do, the things that learned from Southern Large University, I want to apply that locally to my hometown and I don't know…start fostering like change in my local community.

The above participants shared how their direct experiences with racism impacted how

they participated academically and socially on campus and the negative impact on their mental

health. However, few students shared that even without experiencing racism directly, stories of

their peers' encounters with racism had a similar influence on their academic and social

engagement. Britt shared that due to the fear of experiencing racism, based on her friends' past

encounters, she avoided fraternity-hosted events, which she described as a central aspect of

social life on campus, which resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness. She shared that:

> For a while I was sad… I wasn't doing the best, but I'm really good at putting up a front
> that I'm perfectly fine and not opening up so no one could tell that I was sad. I would just
> go out and just eat by myself…sometimes I would eat twice a day because that's how many
> meal exchanges we can have a day, and I would just wait until like specific times to get a
> to-go box because I lived right by the dining hall, so I would just go and eat in my room
> by myself…it was sad and my parents were worried about me, and I was kind of… I would
> say I was kind of depressed and it definitely affected my schoolwork as well, and I didn't
> really know what to do about it…It's just like, I don't want to change myself and become
> someone I'm not just to fill a void, so I'm just going to, you know…be here and be sad and
> cry.

As it related to her desire to attend medical school, Britt shared that she desired a graduate

education in a more diverse environment and as such, would not consider Southern Large

University's medical program unless she was awarded a good financial aid package:

> I've served my four years in [this city] and I don't know if I can do another four. I can't. I
> wouldn't be against it if that was one of the only med schools I got into or if they gave me
> like a really good like scholarship or something and it was better than the others then I
> would maybe consider doing it but I feel like I've experienced [this city] and …I've done
> my four years. That is enough.

Participants' experiences with racism, whether directly or indirectly, and their

perceptions of a hostile campus racial climate challenged their social and academic integration,

thus negatively impacting their mental and at times physical well-being. Additionally,

participants' undergraduate experiences with their campus' racial climate influenced their desire

to return to Southern Large University for graduate school, many citing the lack of diversity as their justification to pursue graduate studies elsewhere.

Another subcategory that emerged within the theme of experiences with racism and institutional barriers is students' ability to challenge inequality and push back against institutional barriers, what Yosso (2005) defines as resistant capital.

Resistance. Although participants detailed the impact of their experiences with racism, discrimination, and microaggressive behavior on their social and academic lives on campus, a spirit of resistance birthed from familial and cultural knowledge empowered them to navigate these challenges and persist in their educational journeys. Siena shared her initial concerns about enrolling at Southern Large University, given what she had heard from alumni about race relations on campus, and detailed the conversation between herself and her older sibling that quelled her fears. She recalled:

> My older sibling, she was like…I would definitely say you deserve to be at Southern Large University. It doesn't matter whether there are more white people or whether you're the only black person, like whatever, you deserve to be there. You got in because you earned it don't let anyone make you feel that you're here because of some favor or whatever. She said if anything, some of them over there should be the ones feeling as if they're not meant to be there just because some of them probably went in there because of legacy or some of them went in there because of family influences or whatever. She said, but you didn't have anything to give, you just went in there because you did good in your schoolwork, you earned it, and don't make anyone make you feel any less. If someone doesn't want to be a friend, it's cool, literally, you have your family, and we're going to be here. We're going to be supporting you either way. So she said don't let that get into you. If you want to go to the school, or you feel like it's a good school, then go to it.

This spirit of resistance was also evident in the academic space, as Monica recalled being told by a university administrator that she was not cut out for her major and she responded with: "I've gotten a lot of like, you shouldn't be in this class, you should drop this or you shouldn't even be doing this and it's like oh… okay, let's do it!" She shared that these conversations, where

she was discouraged from pursuing her desired major, came on the heels of a decline in her

grades as she struggled to balance her declining mental health with her academic and home-life

responsibilities. This resistant behavior also extended to her views on the additional labor she

and other students of color endure to facilitate the kinds of conversations and teaching moments

she viewed as necessary for social awareness. Monica shared:

> I'm happy that I'm at Southern Large University and the area that I am in because there's a lot to learn. A lot. The [white students] have a lot to learn and it sucks that… me and other people that look like me are having to do the work to teach ...That's also been something that I grappled with in high school, but I feel like at the end of the day, this is what I'm pursuing ...This is what I signed up for so I don't mind teaching in that way. How else are they going to get their information if they're not doing it themselves? So it's always teaching, but it's not like... oh, let me tell you about this…. No, you're going to hold yourself accountable for not doing the work yourself, so I feel like it just really motivates me and pushes me that much harder to like get to my end goal because I know that once I ...not even get there but like once I get on that [graduate school] journey after college and things like that and start working and gaining like career experience it'll...be a lot better.

Participants' resistant behavior was also linked to their desire to engage in social justice

activism, on campus and in their broader communities, as well as their graduate and career

aspirations. Abigail, a child of refugees, detailed where her desire to attend law school began:

> I think I've always been one to take initiative and be a leader in a lot of spaces, but I think specifically when it comes to social justice or my activism and my passion for that, I think it comes from a place where I've seen people, for example, my parents, I've seen them be wronged in certain spaces or I've seen even myself being wronged… I don't know, just growing up, I feel like my area and even my schools have not been representative of people who look like me, and me being bullied for a small portion of my life… I think like third grade was like a moment where I really realized I was Black in America and that really hit me…I think that caused me to dim my light a little bit… and… I think I have a big heart for children, especially in that sense where I want them to know that they are valued. I want them to know they are loved.

Another example of students resisting contrary messaging about their academic abilities

or their place at Southern Large University was evidenced in Susan's response to how her

racialized experiences at Southern Large University have impacted her graduate degree

aspirations. She recalled:

> I am very proud of myself in that and I feel like that's… I guess mentally setting me up for more success in the future because I know I'm capable of doing things that are out of the ordinary and I don't just need to follow the status quo. I can like deviate if I want to and I'll still make it to where I want to be in the future… It definitely takes a toll on your mental state until you grow out of it, but… you know… we rise above.

As demonstrated through the above excerpts, Black students attending PWIs with

legacies of enslavement and hostile campus racial climates navigate their academic and social

environments on campus highly aware of how they are perceived. However, amid hostility,

uncertainty, and discrimination, participants, through oppositional behavior, were able to

challenge inequality, maintain their aspirations for graduate school and resist the idea that

students like them do not belong or cannot succeed at Southern Large University and beyond.

Navigational Support and Resilience Through Social Networks

Thus far, I've presented evidence to support that Black students attending a PWI actively

seek comfort and safety in affirming spaces and engage in a myriad of coping strategies to resist

discrimination, make continued academic progress, and maintain high graduate school and career

aspirations. However, what emerged as the final salient theme in the investigation of Black

student experiences is participants' reliance on their social networks to assist them aspire to, and

navigate institutions not designed with them in mind, for as Jamaican musician Dennis Brown

sang, *No man is an island, and no man stands alone*.

Family and kin. Participants, both first and continuing-generation, spoke highly of their

family's influence on their educational aspirations and trajectories, with one participant sharing

that her family's influence on her graduate and career aspirations began the moment her parents

chose her name. Britt, who plans on attending medical school post-graduation, recalled her :

> My dad, he's very intelligent in his unique ways. He has a master's degree in accounting
> and business management… I think that's what it is, so my parents have always kind of
> …pushed me to pursue graduate education…interestingly, I'm actually named after a
> Nigerian doctor…

Britt went further to explain that in her Nigerian culture, the pursuit of higher education was not

a matter of *if*, but rather an expectation that significantly shaped her educational aspirations. She

shared:

> I feel like [pursuing higher education] was just… it was just something casual… it was
> almost expected. It wasn't really a question, it was more of a…you *are* type of thing. I
> would say Nigeria, especially Nigerians in the diaspora, feel like you have to go to school
> because, I mean, they did move from one country to a whole different world, and they kind
> of expect you to be successful and they see education as the correct path towards their long-
> term goals. So it was more casual, you're expected to go to university and then maybe grad
> school. I feel like Nigerian parents are just… honestly, West African parents in general, I
> don't know about the other parts of the continent but they've always had this thing where
> you have to either be a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, like those are your three options…so
> it's just, I don't know, it was kind of just expected.

Lysandra, a first-generation student, spoke of her family's encouragement to pursue

higher education and their perceived value in earning a graduate degree, despite never being able

to complete bachelor's degrees of their own. She shared:

> I'm a first-generation college student…both my parents finished high school and went to
> college, but weren't able to finish because they had my oldest sister… so I would say that
> definitely impacted how they raised me and my siblings. Education was always a huge
> priority. They definitely told me that I should go as far as I can in education just because it
> gives you a lot more freedom financially and just in general to travel and experience the
> world… so that's always been an expectation to excel in school and you know, go ahead
> and take that step.

Catherine, a fourth-year senior with aspirations to pursue a master's of Education post-

graduation, spoke of how her commitment to pursuing higher education and the resilience she's

developed as she's navigated her learning environments stemmed from witnessing her mother

balance motherhood and her own degree aspirations. She recalled:

My mom had me young, so she herself was going through community college and then transferred to Texas Southern. So growing up and going to TSU with her was really cool. So education has always been super important and education was always "the way out" or the way to higher goals, higher dreams, so seeing my mom do that… because we basically grew up together, she had me when she was 20… so that was really cool seeing her put herself through education to meet her goals and then knowing that like okay if I have higher goals I want to reach, then education is the way to do it.

Catherine recalled how her community rallied around her and her family when they learned of her acceptance into Southern Large University, illustrating the impact of her community on her educational journey:

 [Being accepted into Southern Large University] was definitely a big thing, people would say "Wow, Catherine is doing it big!" and "Oh, she's going to school? Okay, bet! Let's pour these resources into her". I was getting money from people I didn't even know. They were like, use this to buy your dorm room bed sheets… that was the type of support I got from the people around me… they were just so excited that me and my peers were going to school.

Peers. In addition to family and extended community, each participant shared about the influence of their friends and peers on their experience at Southern Large University and their desires for graduate education. From mental and emotional support, motivation and encouragement, and resource and information sharing, the community of support students built while on campus, served as a source of strength, resilience, and joy for many participants. Mimi1, a first-generation third-year student, recalled how the friends she met while attending a protest on campus during her first year on campus continued to support her throughout her time at Southern Large University:

Honestly, I feel like my time here at Southern Large University hasn't been smooth at all.. my first year, we had the [shooting] tragedy happen, and I feel like that has just been something that we've been dealing with as a community since then. And then last year, with the Palestinian protests and the encampment and stuff… that was…an experience…I feel like if I didn't have my community and support from my friends… because we all align with those things, so we often do those things together…I feel like if I was doing that alone, it definitely would be… I would be feeling it more emotionally, and it would feel very isolating.

Not only did she speak of the impact of her friends sharing in and supporting her social justice

activism, but also the emotional support, recalling that being in community with her friends was

part of her Black joy. She shared:

> I think for me [black joy] is just being around my friends… being around my family… I think if I didn't have my friends throughout all of this, I definitely would be a lot more discouraged and just head down, let me just do everything I need to do and leave. But I think… we just push each other to be better and we surround ourselves in similar spaces and I don't think that's rubbed off in a competitive nature… it's just a… we're all here together, we all can win mindset.

Mimi, who shared that being able to find community within spaces that affirmed her

Blackness and her queer identity impacted her sense of belonging, also shared how the friends

she made in those spaces impacted her academic outcomes as well:

> Just…having friends and being in spaces where my identities are seen, heard, and acknowledged…and just feel a sense of belonging…it just feels a lot better. It's just…so nice and so… I feel much happier being at Southern Large University due to having my community and having my space, my group of people that really know and understand me, and then I'm able to understand I don't have to perform. I can be my authentic self and it's helpful academically as well. I don't know… I'm just…able to… ask questions and rely on people for support. I'm much more likely to ask for support and help and not just suffer through it. It's just a much happier experience…

Siena, with aspirations of becoming a physician's assistant, spoke of the role her friends

and family played in assisting her to navigate her concerns about graduate programs and future

careers:

> Before I went to Southern Large University, I was thinking of PA school, but then when I went there and I met some friends who were also thinking of the PA route and the reason they want to go to PA school… I was thinking I'd be dealing with dead bodies and I'm scared of the dead so [I told myself] I'm not going to go to PA school if I'm going to have to be dealing with people dying in my hands and all that stuff. But then my friends were like, you need to do more research because it's not all about people dying they are different specialties to PA, so if you think you want to do this, do your research and definitely go for it.

Participants shared how their friends supported them through difficult situations, provided

counsel when needed, and even became family. Abigail, a child of immigrants whose home base

is hundreds of miles away from Southern Large University, spoke of how thankful she is to have

found friends who became her home away from home:

> I think I feel more grateful for my friends because I had such negative experiences with
> friends throughout high school and middle school… just friends in general, it was hard for
> me but coming to college and finding such a loving and intentional group of friends has
> been so beautiful… such an amazing experience. So I think they have provided me a lot of
> support, and like being so far away from home, they've really given me a home away from
> home honestly. I'm lucky enough to have my roommate, she and her family, once they
> found out I lived so far away from home, they just opened up their house to me… when
> she'd go home for a break, I'd go home with her and for her family events… I don't know
> I'd always just be there. I felt so loved and supported by her.

The friends Black students make during their academic tenure have been shown to serve as

mentors, safe places, motivators, career advisors, and even family.

Faculty, staff, and community mentors. The support participants received from faculty,

staff, and other administrators is the final subcategory of Black students' navigational support

and resilience through social networks. From formally established networks to organically

developed relationships, participants were clear about the impact of supportive faculty, staff, and

community mentors on their undergraduate experience and graduate aspirations. Paula shared

how her academic advisor and a DEI liaison helped her successfully transition into the

Commerce school and maintain her academic motivation:

> Within my major there's a DEI liaison that helped me transition to Commerce and she also
> planned a lot of events for black, first-gen LGBTQ+, etc. students that gave us an
> opportunity to participate in and meet other students and hear their perspectives on things.
> My academic advisor in Comm was also very helpful with my transition and preparing me
> to study abroad, because he was also the study abroad coordinator. The DEI liaison is a
> black woman, and my academic advisor is a white male, and I worked with them a lot at
> the beginning during the transition because it was kind of like starting college all over
> again… so I worked with them continuously… we did check-ins to see how I was doing
> and there's also another academic advisor…She was helping me with certain finance
> concepts because before coming to Comm, I needed some extra help in that arena because
> accounting didn't really go well for me. So she was checking on me periodically when she
> would see me around. So checking in, touching bases, seeing how everything was going,
> and if I had any concerns, they would direct me to available resources or they would try to
> help me to the best of their abilities.

100

When asked to describe how the support of her advisors and the DEI liaison impacted her

transition to the Comm school and her overall experience at Southern Large University, she

shared:

> I think it helped me out a lot…especially with trying to adjust to Comm all over again halfway through my academic career, where I felt very demoralized at first because everything was new to me again… like I had to make new friends…school was a big part of my life so I think that helped me stay motivated to finish because there were certain points where I was like…I don't even know if I want to do this anymore… so I think it helped me stay level-headed.

> Whereas Paula was able to get navigational support from faculty and staff associated with

her academic major, Britt, a pre-med continuing-generation student, shared that her support

system lies outside of formal university relationships. She explained:

> I feel very supported. Not because of any school system or anything like that, mostly because of the friends I've made this year specifically. I feel like I'm able to talk to them openly, and the volunteer groups I'm in, they definitely taught me a lot about mental health and things like that. I'm able to express my feelings with the charge nurses at the outpatient surgery center…I volunteer there once a week and the charges are super sweet and I always ask them for advice because they're like older than me. They always tell me you should do this, it's a good idea and they know I'm pre-med and everything and they know… I guess the route that I'm taking and everything, and they always comfort me. I took Bio this semester, and if I had a bad exam, they'd be like, it's okay, you're going to get it on the next one!

Not only did the nurses at her internship provide emotional support and encouragement, they

also provided a safe space for her to discuss her graduate school and career aspirations. She

shared:

> I was at a point where I was just like, wait, do I want to be a doctor or do I want to be a nurse practitioner? Do I want to do this? Do I really want to do [medical school]? and [the charge nurses] just flat out said to me, you don't seem like the person to be bossed around… so you should stick with being a doctor.

> In addition to the support participants received from academic advisors and internship

mentors, some participants shared how scholarship and fellowship administrators served as their

primary source of navigational support, whereby supplementing the support received from

university faculty, staff, and family members. Catherine, a fourth-year child of immigrants

interested in pursuing a master's degree in education, shared that the support she's received from

the Black administrators and educators of her African-American teaching fellowship supported

her graduate degree aspirations by providing her with a network of industry professionals. She

shared:

> The black educators and administrators that I've met through African-American teaching fellows…they'll have events throughout the year where we'll go to coffee and tea houses and we'll get to meet and have a Q&A with other Black educators. I've met educators from [a nearby city] because they'll drive up for the event too, and then obviously like all the ones who already live in [current city]… I was able to meet a black principal at a school, and then she invited me to go tour the school, and she's just like, hey, if we have an opening, I want you to have it… those connections only come from being in certain spaces and African-American Teaching Fellows was that certain space and having all these people's numbers now, they'll say please reach out anytime for anything, and that all those doors just opened up this year because I applied…so all those connections are fresh, but so strong.

In addition to expressed mentorship and career opportunities afforded to her through the African-

American teaching fellowship, Catherine also shared how the network of Black educators

directly influenced her graduate aspirations by encouraging her to be a change-maker. She

recalled:

> So coming to [Southern Large University], I was very… I don't know, I guess naive might be the word, but I was very much like… I just want to be a special education teacher and I want to impact black students …I want it to impact all students, but specifically black students because there's a lot of over-representation in special education of Black boys mostly and I just want to be another black teacher in a school, in a district to… help those Black students. But then after having spent my time in the Ed school, being around all those Black educators, I was like, oh…it is bigger than that. It is much bigger than just being another black body in a school or a district. I can teach the 80% of white women who make up American schools how to be better teachers… I don't have to just go in and be better than them, but I can teach them how to be better. I don't just have to be a teacher. I can be a reading specialist because literacy rates are awful, especially in the Black community, especially in the deep South, that's what I can do. Yes, I can impact students on an interpersonal level in my classroom, or whoever has an IEP was the goal, but no, it's bigger than that, and it's bigger than me just being a teacher. Do we have room to just be teachers? Yes, but no, there's too much that needs to happen. So I think that that was a huge

102

thing because I came to college just like, yep, I want to be a teacher and I know Southern
Large University is going to help me do that. Then the black educators at Southern Large
University were like, you can be a teacher, but let's be a change maker. Let's do bigger, and
I was like, you are so right... I can do more and I want to. It's not a burden. I desire to do
more. This is only the beginning.

Catherine recognized the value of professional networks and acknowledged that opportunities

like the ones made available to her through the African-American Teaching Fellowship are not

possible without being connected to a network of professionals. For not only was she able to

learn from the experiences of Black industry professionals, but the connections made during her

participation in the fellowship have opened doors for future career and mentorship opportunities.

Qualitative Summary

As illustrated through the thematic analysis of participants' interview data, the Black

students attending Southern Large University interviewed for this study desire to be accepted by

their campus community in their fullness, experience racism, discrimination, and

microaggressive behaviors that negatively impact their academic engagement and social

experiences on campus and have been able to successfully navigate their environments with the

support of social networks. The above-presented experiences also reflected the influence of

participants' intersecting identities, whereby their socioeconomic status, generation status, and

sexuality, in conjunction with their race, interacted with systems of oppression and influenced

the way students engaged with the college environment, sustained academic motivation, and

maintained graduate degree aspirations. While some common patterns emerged given

participants' shared racial identity, their backgrounds, familial, social, and professional

relationships, and identities uniquely shaped their academic and social experiences. With this

context in mind, in the following chapter, I discuss the convergence of the quantitative and

qualitative findings and present implications for policy and practice and directions for future

research.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending a predominantly white institution. Utilizing a parallel convergent mixed-methods design, quantitative data from student surveys and qualitative data from one-on-one interviews were collected and analyzed to address the following research questions:

1. What forms of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions are associated with the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending PWIs?

2. How do Black students attending PWIs describe the impact of community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions on their undergraduate experience and graduate degree aspirations?

In the sections to follow, I present a discussion of this study's findings, implications and recommendations for research, policy and practice, limitations of the study, and a conclusion.

Discussion

The findings from this study are situated within the existing literature on degree aspirations, and the discussion is organized by three key findings, with specific outcomes from the study discussed for each.

Community Cultural Wealth and Graduate Degree Aspirations

Existing research on degree aspirations generally, and graduate degree aspirations more specifically, points to the influence of students' background characteristics (Astin, 1977; Carter, 2001; Dorimé-Williams, 2020; Li et al., 2022; McClelland, 1990; McDonough, 1997; Wofford et

al., 2022), pre-college familial and social networks (McCallum, 2012; McCarron and Inkelas, 2006; Means et al., 2022), institutional characteristics (Allen, 1992; Carter, 2001; Heath, 1992), and college experiences (Carter, 2001; Cuellar & Gonzalez, 2021) on their educational aspirations. This study's exploration of Black students' community cultural wealth adds to the literature on degree aspirations, as it extends our understanding of the cultural wealth housed within the Black community and their influence on Black students' long-term educational goals.

The findings from the quantitative analysis revealed that two forms of community cultural wealth tested in the model were predictive of Black students' aspirations for graduate degrees: social capital, captured through the racial composition of students' pre-college networks, and resistance capital, depicted by students' social change orientation. The racial composition of students' pre-college networks assessed the racial demographics of the members of participants' high school and home community contexts, and students' social change orientation reflected their desire to influence social values and work forward racial equity. However, there were notable differences in the predictive power of cultural wealth for students who aspired to a master's degree compared to those who aspired to a PhD or a professional/medical doctorate, as neither the racial composition of students' pre-college networks nor their social change orientation was shown to significantly influence aspirations for a master's degree.

The quantitative findings would suggest that there are underlying factors that predict Black students' master's degree aspirations that may not have been included in the analytic model. In Cuellar and Gonzalez's (2021) investigation into the graduate degree aspirations among Latinas/os, the results of their multinomial logistic regression also revealed differences between in predictive power of their variables of interest at the master's, PhD, and

professional/medical doctorate levels, with pre-college aspirations for bachelor and master's degrees, institutional characteristics, and students' academic major being the significant predictors at the master's level. However, the qualitative analysis of participants' interview data revealed that community cultural wealth factors, such as support from social networks and familial influence on educational trajectories and institutional and academic experiences, including perceived faculty support, contributed to students' desire to pursue a master's degree. The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings was evidenced through participants' descriptions of the impact of familial capital and the role of their family, community, and kin in shaping and nurturing their educational goals, further confirming prior research on the influence of familial capital on students' degree aspirations. The qualitative findings also highlighted how students' desire to engage in social justice and racial equity activism influenced their aspiration to pursue graduate education, further strengthening the quantitative findings at the professional/ medical doctorate level.

Yosso (2005) noted that social capital extends beyond verbal support and words of encouragement to encompass the networks of people and resources housed within marginalized communities, that, in the case of educational aspirations, Black students use to gain access to and navigate their educational landscapes. The racial composition of a student's pre-college social networks—including their neighborhood, high school, friends, and teachers in high school—was found to be predictive of students' aspirations for a PhD. This finding would suggest that Black students whose social networks are predominantly composed of people of color have higher odds of aspiring to a PhD than those with fewer people of color in their networks. This finding was also consistent across generational and socioeconomic lines as both first and continuing-generation students and students with varying levels of family income communicated their social

networks' influence on their educational trajectories. However, differences in the networks of

people that informed students' educational desires, and the methods used by their networks

varied.

As illustrated through the quantitative findings, socioeconomic status remains a

significant predictor of graduate aspirations at the master's level, validating McDonough's

(1997) and Carter's (2001) assertions regarding the influence of social class on educational

trajectories but in contrast with Wofford et al.'s (2022) findings. First-generation low-income

students in the sample expressed that, as they were the first in their families to navigate the

higher education landscape, much of the support from their immediate families came in the form

of verbal encouragement and motivation. This finding was also evidenced through the narratives

of immigrants and children of immigrants, where their desires to pursue higher education

generally, and graduate education more specifically, stemmed from their family's emphasis on

the value of education as a means of increased social mobility and financial freedom.

Particularly at the intersection of generation, immigration, and socioeconomic status,

participants who identified as first-generation, low-income, and from a family of immigrants

spoke of the influence of cultural contexts and family dynamics on their attitudes toward higher

education. These students reported being raised in communities where the opportunity to pursue

higher education was seen as a privilege they were expected to capitalize on, which often

resulted in participants feeling pressure to excel academically. To this end, while familial support

and encouragement have been linked to Black students' academic success (McCallum, 2012),

qualitative findings from this study indicate that the pressure to succeed academically has the

potential to overwhelm students, thus negatively impacting their mental health.

First-generation students and students from immigrant backgrounds reported receiving support in the form of college choice information and financial assistance resources from members of their extended communities, including extended relatives and high school administrators, thus filling the knowledge and resource gaps that existed within their homes. Continuing-generation students, on the other hand, reported that much of their support and access to information regarding their options for higher education came from within the home, where parents and older siblings were cited as their primary sources of navigational support. While prior research points to the challenges of cultural mismatch for first-generation students (Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012), the findings from the present study align with McCallum's (2012) research on the role of familial and social networks in shaping Black students' aspirations for graduate education, left underexplored by Carter's (2002) original work.

Another element of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework investigated in this work was Black students' resistance capital, captured by their social change orientation. Consistent with prior research from Cuellar and Gonzalez (2021), students' social change orientation was shown to influence their aspirations for professional/medical doctorates. The quantitative results indicate that participants' motivation to address systemic barriers and commitment to social justice was predictive of their desire to pursue professional or medical doctorates. This finding was consistent throughout the qualitative analysis as many participants, particularly those with aspirations of pursuing a JD, attributed their desire to pursue education beyond the baccalaureate to their involvement in and support of social justice initiatives. Participants with desires to pursue careers in the fields of medicine and education discussed how their awareness of systemic inequality and oppression in their chosen fields influenced their pursuit of graduate degrees as an opportunity to contribute to systematic change.

The final form of community cultural wealth examined in the present study is
navigational capital, which Yosso (2005) describes as marginalized students' ability to navigate
institutions not created with them in mind. The qualitative analysis revealed that students'
resistance capital, demonstrated by oppositional behavior that challenges inequality, and their
familial and social capital, significantly contributed to their ability to navigate the higher
education system. Participants expressed being acutely aware that the spaces in which they
occupied on their predominately white campus were not designed with their identities and
experiences in mind, which contributed significantly to their low sense of belonging. However,
by relying on cultural knowledge developed through family and support from networks of
friends, faculty, and administrators, participants were able to develop the navigational capital
used to maneuver through educational landscapes and further develop their graduate educational
goals.

This above-presented discussion of findings highlighted that students from marginalized
backgrounds encounter systemic barriers that shape their aspirations, thus confirming recent
reports by the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) and RTI International (2021).
However, these findings extend Carter's (2001) conceptualization of the kinds of capital present
in marginalized communities that influence Black students' long-term education goals by
highlighting that the unique forms of cultural wealth act as a source of opportunity and strength
for Black students.

Racialized Campus Experiences and Emotional Responses

Institutional experiences were found to play an integral role in shaping participants'
educational aspirations, a finding consistent with prior research (Allen, 1992; Cabrera & La
Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006). The present study also confirmed prior findings that a campus' racial

climate, including racialized classroom experiences and experiences with racism,

microaggressions, and discrimination, is associated with Black students' educational trajectories

(Clayton et al., 2023; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Jack, 2016, 2019; Keels, 2020; Solórzano et

al., 2000). Recent work from Garibay and colleagues (2020) found that Black students'

emotional responses to their institution's history of enslavement influenced their educational

experiences, and the present study extends this work by highlighting the influence of these

emotional responses on Black students' graduate degree aspirations. However, whereas prior

literature on campus racial climates points to the adverse effects of hostile campus racial climates

on Black students' engagement, academic persistence, and aspirations (Griffin, 2012), findings

from this study indicate that participants' racialized classroom experience and emotional

responses to their institution's enslavement history were positively associated with graduate

degree aspirations at the PhD level.

Contrary to Carter's (2002) model, the quantitative analysis revealed that students'

experiences with microaggressions on campus, separate from their racialized classroom

experiences, did not significantly influence their desires for a graduate education. However,

results of the quantitative analysis revealed that racialized classroom experiences, captured by

experiences in the classroom such as feelings of tokenism, were found to significantly predict

Black students' desire to obtain a professional or medical doctorate compared to a bachelor's

degree. Additionally, Black students' racialized emotions, included in the model as students'

emotional response to slavery, were significantly associated with increased odds of aspiring for a

PhD. Though a recent area of study, research has shown that Black students respond unfavorably

to their institutions' enslavement histories, thus threatening their academic and social outcomes

on campus (Garibay et al., 2020; Garibay & Mathis, 2021). However, the findings from this

study show that participants with heightened emotional responses to slavery have increased odds

of aspiring to a PhD. Consistent with Cooper et al. (2019), who found that students who

perceived greater diversity intolerance on their campuses had increased graduate school

aspirations, this finding suggests that participants' awareness of their institutions' relationship

with slavery, and their subsequent emotional response, may result in a desire to challenge racial

inequality through a commitment to research and scholarship as students may view graduate

education as a means to address and challenge systemic inequities. The qualitative and

quantitative results also converged to reinforce these assertions, as participants often reflected on

how their institutions' histories shaped their perceptions of their place at the university, which in

turn influenced their desire to contribute to racial justice through graduate education.

These findings would suggest that, though negative racialized experiences and hostile

campus racial climates have been found to deter Black students' graduate aspirations (Carter,

2001, 2002; Heath, 1992), they may also fuel Black students' motivation, persistence, and

aspirations for graduate study as a means of resistance. This body of work adds to the literature

on Black students' graduate degree aspirations by highlighting that students' choice of

undergraduate institution and their subsequent experiences on campus can illicit emotions that

influence graduate degree aspirations.

The qualitative findings add to the existing literature by highlighting the coping

mechanisms and resilience strategies students employ to navigate their hostile campus climates

and maintain aspirations for graduate study. Consistent with Clayton et al. (2023), participants'

relationships with their peers emerged as a source of strength, motivation, and resilience used to

reduce the adverse effects of racism, microaggressions, and isolation on their academic

aspirations. The present study also adds nuance to the conversation surrounding the influence of

peer networks on marginalized student outcomes by detailing how institutional commitment to
fostering inclusive and affirming environments through university-sponsored organizations and
affinity groups is associated with students' long-term academic and social outcomes.

Participants, particularly those living at the intersection of multiple marginalized
identities, shared how student-run organizations and affinity groups, fellowship cohorts, and
academic clubs that cater to their intersectional identities and diverse interests, also fostered the
kind of resilience used to counteract oppressive systems and climates. For most of the
participants in the present study, community was built and sustained along the lines of race,
where students reported feeling accepted as their most authentic selves amongst other Black
students on campus. This finding aligned with Carson's (2009) work on Black student
collectivism, which asserts that Black collectivism affords Black students attending PWIs,
particularly those with hostile campus racial climates, the confidence needed to persist and
achieve academic success (Tichavakunda, 2022).

The Role of Black Joy in Academic Persistence

A new finding from this study on academic persistence and Black students' graduate
degree aspirations, is the significance of Black joy in predicting graduate aspirations at the
master's and professional or medical doctorate levels. Black joy, measured in the quantitative
analysis as the frequency with which students experienced happiness, fun, a sense of fulfillment,
and feeling loved and cared for, was shown to increase the odds of participants aspiring for a
graduate degree. This finding suggests that the more Black students feel loved, cared for, and
fulfilled on their predominantly white campuses, the more likely they are to demonstrate what
Yosso (2005) describes as aspirational capital, their hopes and dreams for graduate education
despite persistent education inequities.

113

The study of Black joy in academic contexts is fairly new, with only a handful of studies investigating Black joy in connection to Black student outcomes. Recent research from Tichavakunda (2022) outlined that according to Black students attending historically white institutions (HWIs), Black joy is associated with their achievement and collectivity. Through this work, Tichavakunda (2022) argued that investigating Black students' sources of Black joy and how it is developed and sustained, allows for a more nuanced understanding of Black students' experiences. Lawson (2024), another scholar theorizing about the role Black joy plays in Black students' experiences, albeit within the context of K-12 education, argued that cultivating Black joy and a sense of well-being is a critical classroom practice. Both Tichavakunda and Lawson described their motivation for exploring Black students' positive racialized emotions and their influence on students' outcomes as a much-needed departure from the overwhelming focus on threats to Black students' academic and social success that exists in education research. They argued that by solely focusing on the threats, barriers, and challenges faced by marginalized communities, we, as researchers and practitioners, limit our understanding of the marginalized student experience, thus limiting our ability to propose nuanced solutions for support.

As evidenced by the present study, Black joy is predictive of Black students' outcomes. However, this intersectional exploration demonstrates that the Black student experience is not a monolith; therefore, neither is their definition, expression, or sources of joy, thus understanding how Black students experience Black joy and the sources from which they derive it is imperative. The Black joy measure used in the quantitative analysis captured students' feelings and experiences of love, care, fun, and fulfillment, and the qualitative analysis supported this conceptualization with students' expressions of culture, accomplishment, and acceptance, which connects with the quantitative items of fulfillment and feeling loved and cared for.

For the participants interviewed in this study, Black joy was discussed in terms of its role in Black students' experiences on campus and their graduate degree aspirations. Some participants reported that Black joy was found and shared in spaces where their identities, cultures, and achievements were valued, resulting in an increased sense of belonging and overall well-being. Others described Black joy as a source of motivation and resilience, which supported their ability to navigate an institution built by their enslaved ancestors' labor. Along with motivation and resistance, Black joy was used as a coping mechanism for participants who experienced racism and microaggressions, as it provided an outlet for affirming their identities through moments of celebration and cultural pride. Black joy contributed to the confidence and self-efficacy participants used to maintain belief in their abilities and aspirations for graduate education. Black joy, as both a predictor and an outcome, nurtured the social networks that provided participants with the resources and support needed to navigate their educational trajectories and maintain their aspirations. Finally, Black joy served as a form of graduate degree aspirational capital, instilling a sense of hope and possibility that encouraged participants to shoot for the moon.

Though not explicitly included in the quantitative or qualitative analysis as a variable, Yosso's (2005) aspirational capital has been at the heart of the present study, and the connections between Black joy and Black students' aspirations were highlighted through my participants' narratives. Despite Black first-generation students entering college without a roadmap or frame of reference for success in higher education and Black immigrants and children of immigrants leaving behind their ancestral homes and connections to their culture in hopes of increased opportunities through higher education. Despite Black low-income students carrying the burden of having to weigh the cost of attendance with the perceived benefits of higher education and the

demonstrated ways in which predominantly white institutions with hostile campus racial climates threaten Black students' academic and social outcomes, Black joy remained a consistent source of resilience, motivation, and aspirational capital.

Implications

The findings from the present study have implications for research, policy, and practice, which will be addressed in the following section. With one of the main objectives of this work being to contribute to best practices for Black student support, I begin with implications to policy and practice and conclude with directions for future research.

Policy and Practice

Capitalize on Community Cultural Wealth in Pre-College Communities. Though pre-college experiences were narrowly addressed in this body of work, the findings point to the influence of Black students' pre-college social networks on their graduate aspirations. Namely, familial capital through family's influence on Black students' educational trajectories and social capital in the networks and communities of support that assist students in navigating the higher education landscape—from application to graduation and everything in between.

Prior research on students' pre-college racial environments has reported that over 70% of Black students in America attend predominantly minority schools (Frankenberg et al., 2003), which are among some of the most under-resourced, understaffed, and neglected in the country (Saenz, 2010)—resulting in serious equity implications for students' educational trajectories. The findings from this study, however, indicated that participants entering college from communities and high schools with predominantly people of color had increased odds of aspiring to a PhD. To this end, Black high school students would benefit academically and socially from culturally

116

affirming college preparation, mentorship, and bridge programs that connect Black students with scholars and professionals of color, thus growing their social networks.

Though structural diversity as a solo measure of diversity is insufficient for improving Black students' experiences and outcomes (Hurtado et al., 1998, 1999, 2008), the findings from the present study highlight that representation does matter. To strengthen and capitalize on Black students' community cultural wealth in pre-college spaces, institutions and practitioners should expand mentorship programs and invest in bridge programs that support Black students' transition into college by strengthening their networks of professionals of color.

Invest in Intersectional Support Systems for Black Students. As demonstrated through this body of work, the Black experience is not monolithic, but rather diverse and multifaceted. Love (2019) asserts that "Intersectionality is not just about listing and naming your identities—it is a necessary analytic tool to explain the complexities and the realities of discrimination and of power or the lack thereof, and how they intersect with identities" (Love, p. 3) As such, scholars and practitioners provide must first recognize the complexity of how students' multiple marginalized identities (race, gender, socioeconomic status, generation status, etc.) interact with systems of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) and then honor and reflect this complexity in their systems of support. Participants' narratives highlighted the rich cultural, socioeconomic, ethnic, and generational diversity within the Black student population that ultimately shaped their experiences on campus, making a *one-size-fits-all* approach to Black student support insufficient and ineffective.

(Coleman et al. (2020) and McGuire et al. (2016) warned of the pitfalls of using single-identity metrics to study student experiences, and I contend, this must also be extended to Black student support, as well. Participants living at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities,

such as Black and low-income, Black and immigrant, Black and queer, spoke of having found community, safety, and support in spaces on campus that affirmed their multifacted identities. They shared that support from organizations, offices, and clubs that only catered to their Blackness, such as Black Student Associations and Offices of African American Affairs, were insufficient in affirming aspects of their identity beyond race. As such, nuanced identities and experiences require nuanced solutions that prioritize identity-conscious academic, social, and mental health support.

Foster Black Joy as a Social and Academic Resilience Strategy. As demonstrated through my participants' stories, Black joy is love. Black joy is resistance. Black joy is community. Black joy is acceptance and authentic expressions of self, and from this study's findings, we now have evidence that points to Black joy's influence on Black students' graduate aspirations. To capitalize on Black joy as a resilience strategy, university faculty and administrators should create environments where Black joy thrives by investing in culturally affirming spaces and funding Black student organizations and centers that cater to Black students' intersectional experiences. Additionally, participants reported experiencing joy and an increased sense of belonging when they could see themselves represented in their faculty, staff, and university leadership, echoing sentiments of the Black Liberation for Education movement of the 1960s (Drewry & Doermann, 2012.). With this knowledge, institutions should prioritize hiring, retaining, and supporting Black educators and prioritize efforts aimed at creating policies, curricula, and leadership that reflect the Black experience in the United States.

I end this section with a gift from Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts. In her book titled *Black Joy: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration,* author Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts sought to share with the Black community a book of personal stories that highlight moments of joy

within Black culture that challenge the oversimplified narrative that frames Black life primarily through trauma and adversity. In the opening story, readers learn of joy from the perspective of a mother raising her young daughter in a racially hostile society, and as a researcher and practitioner, I offer the same to my Black students:

> Our dancing in the rain wasn't a denial of all the storms that had moved in on Black people that week. It was a dare. An indignant stance of confidence in the midst of this malignant monsoon called systemic racism. Our laughter was a way to say 'you can't steal our joy' to anyone who dare deny our humanity (Lewis-Giggetts, 2022, p. 7).

Directions for Future Research

The present study offered valuable insights into the factors and experiences that contributed to the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending predominantly white institutions. However, though extensive in exploration and comprehensive in methodology, the following areas warrant further exploration.

Institutional Policies and Political Climate. The present study focused on students' experiences in their pre-college and campus environments and how they supported or hindered their educational aspirations. However, missing from this analysis is an investigation of how political climates and institutional policies, such as the recent push to end DEI initiatives on college campuses (*Tracking Higher Ed's Dismantling of DEI*, 2025), influence Black students' social and academic outcomes. In today's political climate, where initiatives that cater to diverse student needs in the name of equity are openly under attack, coupled with findings from the present study that point to the influence of diverse affirming spaces on Black student outcomes, the dismantling of DEI in higher education has server implications for educational and social inequality. To this end, future research on Black students' experiences at predominately white institutions should investigate how political climates influence the adoption or removal of institutional policies geared towards diversity, equity, and inclusion and their subsequent impact

on Black students' outcomes. In doing so, researchers may better understand the influence of sed policies on Black students' academic and social engagement while attending predominately white institutions and argue for greater institutional accountability.

Intersectional Explorations. The concept of intersectionality asserts that the way in which individuals navigate their environments and how they are perceived by others is influenced by the intersection of the multiple identities they hold (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, and generation status) (Crenshaw, 1994). The demand for intersectional explorations of marginalized student experiences stems from the need for an enhanced understanding of complex identities and systems of oppression that cannot be fully captured by single-identity analyses. McGuire et al. (2016) exploration of how multiple marginalized identities (Black, Muslim, immigrant, female) interact to shape a student's college experience highlights the pitfalls of using single-identity metrics to study student experiences – moving the scholarship of marginalized student identity development in oppressive environments from *either-or* to *yes-and*.

Another pitfall of the *either-or* framing of student identity is that it does not allow for a thorough investigation of power dynamics and their influence on marginalized student experiences. In their work on the experiences of Black queer and transgender students, Coleman and colleagues (2020), warn against the use of singular narratives that erase queer and transgender experiences from Black student retention research and Black racial identity from queer and transgender retention discourse. They argue that moving away from singular narratives by taking an intersectional approach to studying Black queer and transgender student outcomes may reveal experiences and power dynamics that lie at the intersections of race and sexuality which has serious implications for policy and practice.

In that vein, few studies have utilized an intersectional lens to investigate the unique

influence of multiple marginalized identities on students' aspirations for graduate education. As demonstrated through this study's findings, participants' experiences and interactions with their college environment reflected the impact of their multiple marginalized identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, generation status, sexuality). Therefore, a thorough intersectional approach to investigating Black students' graduate degree aspirations should focus on how students with multiple marginalized identities interact with the systems of oppression reflected in their learning environments (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, etc.) to influence their graduate degree aspirations.

From Graduate Aspiration to Enrollment. Of the eleven participants interviewed for this study, each one reported having aspirations for graduate education, however, as expressed in McCarron and Inkelas (2006), significant gaps between graduate aspiration and graduate degree attainment exist within marginalized student populations. As such, a longitudinal exploration of this study's sample would allow for a more thorough investigation into the factors that not only influence Black students' graduate degree aspirations, but also maintain those aspirations over time, and whether or not those factors significantly predict their graduate school enrollment and degree attainment.

Black Joy in Student Outcomes. The presented findings from this study add to the body of degree aspiration literature with its assertions on the influence of Black joy on Black students' aspirations for graduate degrees, but what of other outcomes? Positive emotions and well-being have been linked to improved physical health, greater success in work performance and social relationships, and building coping mechanisms and resilience (Kansky & Diener, 2017; Le Nguyen & Fredrickson, 2018; Tugade et al., 2021). Given this demonstrated impact on numerous life domains, what other academic outcomes could Black joy play a role in? Does Black joy

influence academic persistence? What about retention, does Black joy play a role in Black students' retention? Does Black joy influence Black students' choice of academic major? And if we take a step back from the higher education landscape, could Black joy positively influence high school student outcomes? What about middle school, a time when students are navigating their intersectional identities and developing their sense of self, could Black joy support their identity development? I pose these questions not merely as hypotheticals, but as evidence to support that this study's investigation of Black joy's influence on students' outcomes is only just the beginning.

Limitations

There are limitations within the present study that impact the generalizability of the findings. The primary limitation noted throughout this study is the demographics of the 11-person qualitative sample. The participants interviewed for the study were overwhelmingly cis-gender women, with ten of the eleven students identifying as cis-gender women, which is not an adequate representation of the Southern Large University student population. Though purposeful sampling methods were introduced, and targeted male recruitment was done in an attempt to increase the male participation rate, the participant pool remained overwhelmingly cis-gender female. Additionally, as my participants' narratives demonstrated the influence of their diverse and intersectional identities on their experience (e.g. low-income compared to high-income, first-generation compared to continuing-generation, and African American experiences compared to the Black immigrant experience) this project could have benefitted from the utilization of an intersectional lens to investigate how intersecting systems of oppression influence students' experiences. Furthermore, the qualitative sample was over-representative of the upper-classman experience, with 82% of the sample being third-year juniors and above, who tend to have higher

graduate degree aspirations. Greater insights into the development of and change in graduate degree aspirations could have been revealed with additional input from first and second-year students.

Finally, while the quantitative surveys captured the experiences of Black students attending twelve different institutions, the qualitative portion was limited to participants from a single institution. Southern Large University is a highly selective institution, and it could be argued that my participants entered their college campus with higher-than-average educational aspirations. To this end, conducting qualitative explorations of student experiences from the remaining eleven institutions would provide deeper insights into the factors that influence Black students' graduate degree aspirations and strengthen the convergence of this study's quantitative and qualitative findings.

Conclusion

The present study set out to accomplish three broad goals: 1) to close the methodological gaps related to the study of marginalized college students' long-term educational goals through the use of mixed methodologies, 2) take an assets-based approach to investigate Black student experiences and their influence on their long-term educational goals, and 3) develop a framework for better understanding and supporting Black students' graduate degree aspirations. Findings from this study provided empirical evidence of the influence of students' community cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and emotions on Black students' aspirations for graduate study.

Through the convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings, the results from this mixed-methods study suggest that 1) Black students' community cultural wealth (social, familial, resistance, and navigational capital) when drawn upon and successfully exchanged within their campus environments, yields positive social and academic outcomes, 2) Black students'

racialized campus experiences and emotions, both positive in the form of support from faculty

and other social networks, and negative in the form of experiences with racism and

microaggressive behavior, influence Black student's desires to pursue education beyond the

baccalaureate, and 3) Black students' experiences and expressions of Black joy served as a

coping mechanism, a significant source resilience amidst adversity, and fostered academic

persistence evidenced through its influence on Black students' aspirations for graduate study.

Along with adding new empirical evidence to pre-existing literature on Black students'

graduate degree aspirations, the present study also introduced a new conceptual framework for

exploring Black students' long-term educational trajectories. By drawing on Carter's (2002)

original theory of degree aspirations and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, the

presented framework for factors influencing Black students' graduate degree aspirations allows

for a more nuanced understanding of the Black student experiences. Additionally, the proposed

framework addressed gaps in Carter's model through the inclusion of Yosso's asset-based

framing of marginalized communities' cultural wealth, and gaps in Yosso's model, as outlined

by Sun (2024), were addressed through the inclusion of structural (campus racial climate) and

systemic (experiences with racism) factors that make it difficult for Black students to capitalize

on their cultural wealth throughout their education journeys.

The quest for more equitable higher education systems must begin by facing a hard truth:

higher education's culture and its subsequent capital benefit some, disadvantage others, and

operate exactly as it was designed. As evidenced in this study's review of literature, higher

education in the United States began as a project of European assimilation and a means of power

production and maintenance within society, and, though centuries since that original project,

very little has changed. The aspirations that led to the fight for Black liberation in education were

never solely about access to content knowledge. From the newly freedmen of the 1860s' desire to read and write, the school desegregation and Black revolutions on college campus movements of the 1960s and 70s, to the "1839 was built on my B(l)ack" and other movements for institutional accountability in the 21st century, access to equitable education was not just an element of Black freedom, but rather, it *was* freedom.

So, while structural barriers persist, many of which are by design, the findings from the present study paint a picture of resilience. Through a complex interplay of cultural wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions, Black students attending predominantly white institutions have found a way to challenge oppressive structures and maintain aspirations for graduate education. However, the process by which marginalized students capitalize on their cultural wealth in exchange for educational benefits is neither linear nor universal. Therefore, to best support Black students' social and academic outcomes while attending institutions not designed with them in mind, higher education scholars and practitioners must continue to address hostile campus racial climates and work toward fostering environments that support Black students' joy, resistance, and persistence, for though today's Black students represent the hopes and the dreams of the slave, this is only the beginning.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Information Sheet

Study Title: Beyond Barriers: An Intersectional Exploration of Community Cultural Wealth, Racialized College Experiences, and Graduate Degree Aspirations Among Black Students

Protocol #: 6971

Please read this information sheet carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of the study is to better understand the factors that influence the graduate degree aspirations of Black students attending a predominantly white institution.

What you will do in the study: You are being asked to participate in an interview. The interview will be audio-recorded, and data will be reflective of your knowledge, opinions, and experiences. You will have the opportunity to skip any question that you wish not to answer.

Time required: The study will require about 1 to 1.5 hours of your time.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks in this study. However, this study will instruct you to reflect on your student experience as it relates to race and generation status and may have you recall any bias-related incidents or microaggressions you have experienced while attending your current institution. This may possibly lead to having a negative experience and/or potentially anger. After completion of your interview, you will receive a resource sheet complete with mental health resources available to you on and off Grounds.

Benefits: There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand the gaps in current student support models, contribute to institutional change, and allow for resource sharing and community building among participants.

Confidentiality: Your audio-recorded interview and subsequent interview transcript will be handled confidentially. Your data will be kept private, and your information will be assigned a pseudonym. The list connecting your identifying information to this pseudonym will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your identifying information will not be used in any presentation or publication.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Your status, including grades, will not be affected by your decision to participate. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.
Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw, your audio-recoded interview will be destroyed. How to withdraw from the study: You may stop participating in the interview by telling the interviewer to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. There is no penalty for

deciding not to participate in the interview, and if you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact Danielle A. Moore-Lewis, M.Ed.

Payment: You will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for participating in the study.
Using data beyond this study: The data you provide in this study will be retained in a secure manner by the researcher for five (5) years and then destroyed.

Please contact the researchers on the study team listed below to:
- Obtain more information or ask a question about the study.
- Report an illness, injury, or other problem.
- Leave the study before it is finished.

Danielle A. Moore-Lewis, M.Ed.
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You may also report a concern about a study or ask questions about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Institutional Review Board listed below.

Tonya R. Moon, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences
One Morton Dr Suite 500
University of Virginia, P.O. Box 800392
Charlottesville, VA 22908-0392
Telephone: (434) 924-5999
Email: irbsbshelp@virginia.edu
Website: www.virginia.edu/vpr/irb/sbs
Website for Research Participants: https://research.virginia.edu/research-participants
UVA IRB-SBS #6971

You may print a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Research Question:

1. How do Black students attending PWIs describe the impact of community cultural

    wealth, racialized experiences, and racialized emotions on their undergraduate

    experience and graduate degree aspirations?

Interview Questions:

1) **Introduction:** Welcome! My name is Dan Moore-Lewis, I use she/her pronouns and want to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today! Through this interview, I am interested in getting to know more about you as an undergraduate student at this university and how your experiences and interactions on Grounds have impacted your academic trajectories and your desire or interest in pursuing graduate school. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions and your responses will remain confidential.

2) **Mindful Practice:** I acknowledge that this time of year can be stressful for students, so before we begin our time together, I would like to invite you to participate in a mindful-minute breathing exercise to help us become connected to and stay present in this moment.

Opening Mindful-Minute Script:
Taking a deep full breath in, and a long, slow, exhale, allowing your eyes to gently close or have a soft gaze. Another nice big breath in, and long, slow, exhale so that you can begin to feel the body release. One more deep, long, inhale, and on the exhale allow yourself to fully arrive into this body, into this moment, and into this breath.
(Pause)
Now let go of any control of the breath and simply allow yourself to be here.
(Pause)
Letting be all the effort it has taken to bring you here now.
(Pause)
Letting be all the thoughts, and pressures of what is yet to come and giving yourself the gift of this moment, this time together with your peers.
(Longer Pause)
Now take a fuller, deeper breath, and on the exhale, refocus into this the group.

3) **Getting to Know You:** Thank you for taking this mindful pause with me! Now let's get started by telling me a little about yourself. Where do you call home? What is your

current year of study and academic interests? And what activities/organizations are you involved in on Grounds?

4) **Family/Community's Influence on Educational Trajectories:** Tell me about your family's educational experiences and their views on education.
   a. **Follow-up:** How was higher education (attending college/university) valued or perceived by those around you (e.g. your family, church family, extended family)?
      i. **Probe:** If they mention that higher education was **not** valued in the family/community networks, **follow up** with: "Were there other people in your life that influenced your decision to attend college? **If so**, please share who they were and talk to me about your experience/relationship with those individuals.

5) **Decision to Attend College:** Tell me about why you decided to go to college. What does going to college mean to you?
   a. **Follow-up:** Were there advantages/disadvantages that you considered when deciding whether or not to attend college after high school? If so, tell me about them.
      i. **Probe:** If the student mentions **finances or student loans**, follow up with: "Tell me more about the role finances played in your decision to attend college?"
   b. **Follow-up:** Tell me about your decision-making process to attend this institution specifically. What did you see as the benefits/sacrifices of you attending this institution?
      i. **Probe:** If the student mentions the **lack of diversity or the university's complicated legacy and relationship with African Americans,** follow up with: "How did you work through this concern to eventually choose to attend? Were there considerations that eased this concern?"
         1. **Follow-up:** Have your impressions or concerns about this institution's legacy and relationship with African Americans changed or remained the same? Talk to me about your present-day feelings about the racial climate on Grounds.

6) **Perceptions and Impact of Racialized Emotions on Black Student Engagement:** How would you define the concept of belonging as it relates to your experience as a Black student here at UVA? In other words, what does belonging mean/ look like to you?
   a. **Follow-up**: Can you describe a time when you felt included on Grounds?
      i. **Probe:** If the experience of inclusion is **race-related**, follow up with: **"**In what ways have your positive racialized experiences on grounds impacted your undergraduate experience and your thoughts about your place within the UVA community?"
      ii. **Probe:** If the student mentions that their experience influenced their **academic self-efficacy**, follow up with: "Talk to me about your academic goals. What do you hope to accomplish during your time at UVA?"

      b. **Follow-up:** Can you describe a time when you felt excluded on Grounds? How did this make you feel?

         i. **Probe:** If the experience of exclusion is **<u>race-related</u>**, follow up with: **"**In what ways have your negative racialized experiences on grounds impacted your thoughts about your place within the UVA community?"

         ii. **Probe:** If the student mentions that their experience of exclusion influenced their **<u>academic self-efficacy</u>**, follow up with: "Have your academic goals or aspirations changed while being a student at UVA? If so, talk to me about your starting education aspirations and what they look like today.

      c. **Follow-up:** Did that experience influence your feelings of joy or positive engagement with campus life? If so, talk to me about what joy looks like for you and how your experience of exclusion has impacted that.

7) **Defining Black Joy**: We spoke a bit about how your experiences on Grounds have influenced your feelings of joy, but if you were to define Black Joy in your own words, how would you define it?

8) **Impact of Racialized Experiences on Academic Journey:** We discussed race a bit earlier, but I would like to follow up on what was shared and ask more specific questions about your racialized experiences. Have you had an experience on Grounds where you thought your race or ethnicity affected how you were perceived or how you were treated? If so, talk to me about that experience and how you navigated the encounter.

      a. **Follow-up:** How did that experience make you feel in the moment, and as you reflect on those experiences, how do you feel about them today?

         i. **Probe:** If the student mentions that the encounter resulted in having **<u>negative feelings about their academic abilities/pursuits</u>**, follow up with: "Have these experiences influenced your desire to pursue education beyond the undergraduate level? If so, talk to me about your long-term academic goals."

      b. **Follow-up**: Did that experience impact the way you participate socially or academically on campus? If so, talk to me about how that experience has impacted the way you "show up" on campus.

      c. **Follow-up:** How, if at all, have these experiences influenced your decision to pursue graduate education after graduation?

9) **Systems of Support:** Do you feel supported on Grounds? If so, what campus resources or support systems (e.g., faculty/staff mentoring, student groups, cultural centers) have been most valuable to you during your time at UVA?

      a. **Follow-up:** Can you talk to me about the impact those support systems have had on your experience as a student here?

         i. **Probe**: If the student mentions a **<u>positive impact on their emotional well-being (sense of belonging, joy, etc.)</u>**, follow up with, "Talk to me about your relationship with your support system. Are they easily accessible to you? How do you go about seeking their support?

        ii.   **Probe:** If the student mentions a **positive impact on their academic journey**, follow up with: "Have you engaged in conversations with these individuals/groups/centers about pursuing graduate school? If so, talk to me about what those conversations have been like.

10) **Graduate Degree Aspirations:** Based on our academic and social experiences on Grounds, are you interested in pursuing graduate school at this or any other institution post-graduation? Why or why not?

        i.   **Probe:** If the student mentions **being weary/hesitant/unsure about the Black graduate student experience**, follow up with**,** "If you were given the opportunity to speak with Black graduate students about their experiences, what would you ask them?

        ii.   **Probe:** If the student mentions **finances or the ability to pay for graduate school**, follow up with, "Can you tell me a little more about the role finances have played in your desire to attend graduate school?"

    b. **Follow-up:** Talk to me about your perceived value of a graduate degree. What would it mean for you to earn a graduate degree?

11) **Wind Down:** If you were given to opportunity to speak with incoming Black first-years about your experience on Grounds thus far, what advice would you give them and why?

    a. **Follow-up**: Was that advice that you were given? If so, by whom?

    b. **Follow-up**: Thinking about your experience thus far, are there things you wish you'd known or things you would have done differently? If so, talk to me about how you believe it could have impacted your experience.

12) **Conclusion:** Before we conclude, is there anything else you would like to add that you did not have the chance to speak about?

11) **Wrap-up**: Thank you for participating in the interview – I truly value your insight! I would like to close our session with another mindful-minute-breathing exercise, but before I do, I want to reiterate that your responses will remain confidential.

Closing Mindful-Minute Script:

Take a moment to sit comfortably, allowing your feet to rest on the ground and your hands to settle in your lap. Begin by taking a deep breath in, and a long, slow exhale, letting go of any remaining tension.

(Pause)

Now, gently bring your attention to this space, to the presence of your peers, and to the energy that was shared in this group today. Let yourself feel a sense of gratitude for your own participation and the stories that were exchanged.

(Pause)

On your next inhale, feel a sense of calm and ease filling your body, and as you exhale, release any remaining thoughts or feelings that may have arisen during our time together.

(Pause)

With your next deep breath in, acknowledge the efforts and insights you've contributed today, and as you exhale, let yourself feel a sense of closure and peace. (Longer Pause) When you're ready, gently refocus on the room, and allow yourself to carry this sense of calm with you as we prepare to close. Take one final, deep breath in... and a slow, full breath out.

(Pause)

Now, bring your attention back to this moment, and when you're ready, slowly open your eyes and rejoin the space.

Appendix C: Participant Interest Form

Participant Information

1. Full Name: (Open Ended)
2. UVA Email Address: (Open Ended)
3. Alternate Email Address: (Open Ended)
4. Preferred Pronouns: (Open Ended)
5. Class Year:
   > First-Year
   > Second-Year/ Sophomore
   > Third-Year/ Junior
   > Fourth-Year/ Senior
   > Firth-Year
   > Other (please specify): [Free response]
6. Academic Major: (Open Ended)

Demographics

7. Are you: (Select all that apply)
   > North African
   > Sub-Saharan African
   > African American
   > Afro-Asian (of African descent with roots in the Indian Subcontinent such as India,
   > Pakistan, and Sri Lanka)
   > Afro-Caribbean (of African descent with roots in a country in the Caribbean Sea where Spanish is not the primary language, e.g., Haiti, Martinique, Jamaica, etc.)
   > Afro-Latina/o/x (of African descent with roots in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Central America, South America, and/or Mexico)
   > Other Black (please specify):
   > American Indian or Alaska Native
   > Mexican/Mexican American or Chicana/o/x
   > Puerto Rican
   > Cuban
   > Central American
   > South American
   > Other Latina/o/x (please specify):
   > East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, among others)
   > Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   > South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Afghani, among others)
   > Southeast Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Hmong, among others)
   > Southwest Asian (e.g., Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, among others)
   > White
   > Some Other Race (please specify): [Free response]
8. Gender Identity:
   > Cisgender man
   > Cisgender woman

Trans man

Trans woman

Gender expansive

Gender fluid

Agender

Gender identity not listed above (please state): [Free response]

9. Are you a first-generation student? (First-generation students are students in which neither parent/guardian has earned a 4-year college degree)

Yes

No

Unsure