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Crossing Jordan: An exploration of academic optimism in the schooling experiences of low-income African American female students and their perceptions of their academic lives

Cristal Nichols

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Crossing Jordan: An Exploration of Academic Optimism in the Schooling Experiences of Low-Income African American Female Students and Their Perceptions of Their Academic Lives

by

Cristal Nichols

Dissertation

Submitted to the College of Education
Eastern Michigan University
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Concentration in Urban Education

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Ypsilanti, Michigan
**Dedication**

To the brave, young, African American women who graciously participated in this research study and shared their life realities by revealing their post-secondary paths to a four-year university, they are, in essence, presenting an educational course for other young women to follow.

To my two beautiful daughters, Simone and Chanel, who have taught me more about love than anyone else in my life. To my precious granddaughters, who mean the world to me and give my world so much meaning. They display in their daily interactions with others, so much love, grace, and dignity; I am humbled and proud to be their grandmother. To my son-in-law, Melvin Berry, who never gives in and always stands strong, as a father and provider. To my future son-in-law, Aaron—a young Barack Obama—what a great role model you are for young, African American men everywhere.

To my sisters, Nina and Denine, who have come out of the darkness into the marvelous light and to my brothers for their love and protection. To my mother, to whom honor is due and who did her best to provide for her children, thank you. To all my family and friends who have supported and encouraged me on this amazing journey called life.

And finally, in memory of my father Luther Lavelle Nichols my nephew Rico Nichols and to a little girl named Autumn, whose short and sweet life reminds me daily of how precious every minute of life truly is and to try very hard not to waste a moment of it.
Acknowledgments

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”

- Nelson Mandela

First and foremost, I must thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who has made all things possible. This biblical quote in Joshua 1: 9–11 has inspired the title of this dissertation research study: “Be strong and courageous… for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go…Prepare your provisions, for within three days you are to pass over the Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.”

To Bobbi Jean Davis, my aunt, who encouraged a 16-year-old, teenage mother to keep the faith and believe that she could make a way out of no way, and I did, thank you. This educational journey started so long ago, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the people who believed in my academic potential when my own faith faltered. First, I have to thank my cousin Toni Veal, who co-financed my relocation to Tallahassee, Florida to attend Florida A&M University, a move that spearheaded my educational journey. Picture Celie and Nettie clapping their hands together in the closing scene of the movie, The Color Purple, that’s us!

I wish to thank Dr. Morris Dunbar for teaching me the importance of self-preservation and Judge Bruce Morrow, who insisted and encouraged me to strive for more and to become more. To my daughter Simone, who gave me my first real reason for striving for a better life and my daughter Chanel for always reminding me to also strive to be a better human being. To Mya and Mia, who have patiently waited for Grandma to finish her work, so I could spend time with them.

Sincere and heartfelt thanks to my dissertation chair, my mentor, and friend, Dr. Valerie Polakow. Dr. Polakow’s insistent call for human beings to never allow basic human needs to be
denied to those who need them the most—women and children—reminds me of a very basic truth, we are all here on this planet to love and care for one other, especially the most vulnerable of us—the children. Through this research and my future work, I am attempting to answer her call to continue the fight for the basic human rights of women and children in poverty in the United States. Also, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Polakow for her attention to my writing and her ability to weave words into stories that resonate with urgency, truth, and the human spirit. Her writings have inspired and motivated me to try to capture the hearts and spirits of the young women in this research study, who have openly shared their life stories with me. Their courage is only exceeded by their honesty. We have laughed and cried together and I am honored they have chosen to allow me to be the instrument that amplifies their voices.

I wish to also acknowledge my dissertation committee members. Dr. Wendy Burke, your insight, intellect, and heart shine bright. Thank you for helping me to discover my research focus. Dr. Ethan Lowenstein, your quiet brilliance does not go unnoticed. Dr. Lynn Nybell for your keen observations, input, and expertise.

And finally, to my family and friends, forgive me for all the events I have forsaken to achieve this academic goal. I am keenly aware that we can never get back the moments missed, but I know by your words of encouragement that you understand. So, again, thank you all for your love and support, it has allowed me to cross over my own River Jordan.

To obtain a college degree for many African Americans is equivalent to crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land, a land of economic freedom and opportunity. I pray that every young African American woman in this research study is able to achieve her educational goal of obtaining a bachelor’s degree and improving her life and the lives of her family.
Abstract

This qualitative dissertation study explored the construct of academic optimism and its manifestation in the schooling lives of low-income, African American females who have obtained post-secondary educational status. The study also examined the facilitators and barriers the participants have encountered on their academic journeys towards the attainment of a four-year college degree. The construct of academic optimism has previously been applied to schools and educators. This research explored the construct of academic optimism as it related to students, in this instance, low-income, African American female college students. The research study also explored what factors contributed to low-income, African American women’s academic achievement in the face of the many challenges experienced in their urban school settings.

Life history methodology was employed to document the schooling experiences of the study’s participants. Open-ended and semi-structured interviews, which encouraged the participants to make meaning of their educational life histories, were conducted between December 2014 and July 2015 with 16 low-income, first-year, African American female college students. Students were selected from community colleges and four-year universities in southeast Michigan. Of the 16 research participants, nine participants’ life histories were constructed as case studies.

The analysis of findings from participants’ narratives revealed themes of parental abandonment; educational struggles—including math anxiety; the importance of supportive and caring adults—including family members, mentors, coaches, and teachers; and resilience and persistence. In addition, the students’ own perceptions of their resilience and efficacy formed a critical and revealing part of the study. This study concluded that the components of academic
optimism—self-efficacy, relational trust, and academic emphasis—along with the character traits of resilience and persistence combined to create low-income, African American female students’ academic optimism.

Recommendations include changes to educational policies and practices in K-12 schooling and higher education in order to build social capital in the lives of low-income, female African American students.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Historically, public schooling in the United States has developed along racial, gender, religious, economic, and social class lines. African American students have endured a long history of discrimination in the U.S. educational system. In 1954, *Brown vs. Board of Education* ended legal educational segregation in U.S. public schools (Stewart, 2008). Yet, sixty years later, educational inequality is still prevalent in the U.S. K-12 schooling system and has contributed to academic achievement gaps between White and minority students (Ayon, 2005; Lipman, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Scott, 2011).

Darling-Hammond (2004) points out that there is “enormous inequality in the provision of education offered in the United States. Unlike most countries that fund schools centrally and equally, the wealthiest U.S. public schools spend at least ten times more than the poorest schools” (p. 6). According to a National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report by Kena et al. (2015), federal educational expenditures decreased 2.6%, or 2 billion, for the 2012—2013 school year. Local revenues also declined 1.8%, resulting in a 5 billion dollar decrease in school expenditures with 4 billion dollars of the reduction directly related to the decline in local property taxes and 1 billion dollars stemming from a reduction in various other local revenue sources (Kena et al., 2015).

U.S. public schools are funded largely through local property taxes; consequently, urban communities with high populations of minority, low-income students have fewer funding opportunities for their students than more affluent suburban communities (Lipman, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Scott, 2011). Educational funding disparities continue to plague low-income urban school districts. Sixteen states continue to utilize “regressive” school funding systems that permit low-poverty school districts to receive more funding than high-poverty school districts.
Additionally, 19 states still provide funding with no difference between low-income and high-income districts. These “flat” school funding systems fail to consider the economic repercussions high-poverty districts encounter without additional funding (Schaffhauser, 2015).

One of the many consequences of the reductions in federal and local school funding is that each school district is tasked with generating the funds to cover their financial shortfalls. Suburban school districts are better equipped to sustain their level of educational expenditures through renewing and/or increasing property taxes and implementing school millages that help to close or at least reduce their educational funding gaps. Urban school districts have fewer economic opportunities to generate the additional funding needed, which sustains educational funding inequities between suburban and urban school districts.

Darling-Hammond (2010) identifies five factors that have created the educational disparities that exist in the current U.S. educational public school system:

- the high levels of poverty that exist in the U.S without any real social safety nets for poor families to rely on, thus reducing their opportunities to build a stable economic foundation;
- the utilization by ailing school districts of cookie cutter learning models, which fail to address the needs of urban students and result in unsupportive teaching practices and dysfunctional learning environments;
- the U.S. public school systems’ inability to develop a system that provides high quality teachers to low-income school districts;
- the failure to disseminate high quality curriculum throughout the school districts; and
- the unequal allocation of educational resources (p. 30).
Urban schools are tasked with educating high volumes of low-income students and students of color and tend to have larger class sizes, fewer teachers, fewer (if any) extracurricular activities, books, materials, supplies, computers, and special services in comparison to suburban schools.

Hence, the U.S. K-12 educational system is saturated with educational disparities. Hochschild (2003) also argues that the variation in state funding is due to a system of nested inequalities. Hochschild identifies a system of nested inequalities that stratifies students by socioeconomic class and measured ability, which dictates their educational fate within a given school setting. The educational funding each school receives from its respective district is attributed to this nested inequality. Public school districts have received a certain percentage of federal funds based on their ability to achieve specific academic goals and objectives of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB; P.L. 107–110), placing overburdened urban school districts at a disadvantage and contributing to the educational inequalities that continue to plague them within the U.S. public school system (Lipman, 2011; Scott, 2011).

The impact of racial, social, and economic inequalities has created a stratified citizenship within U.S. society. Allegretto (2011) concludes, “In 2009, the wealthiest 1% of U.S. households had net worth that was 225 times greater than the median or typical household’s net worth” (p. 2). The economic disparity between high-income U.S. citizens and their low-income counterparts affects every segment of daily life. As of 2015, 16 million U.S. children lived in poverty (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2016). The 2016 federal poverty guideline for a family of four is $24,300 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Federal poverty guidelines determine eligibility for public benefits and are adjusted annually to account for inflation; however, they have not been recalculated for more accurate and current family budget spending ratios in over five decades.
The one-third of family personal income allotted for food, multiplied by three to cover the costs of housing and healthcare in the current calculations of the poverty threshold was created by Molly Orshansky in 1963, and does not accurately reflect current family budgets (Bernstein, 2007). Currently, one tenth of family disposable personal income is allocated for food expenditures for medium income households; yet low-income households spend approximately 34% of their income on food items (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). Bernstein (2007) argues that the current U.S. poverty calculations are outdated and fail to provide an accurate account of the number of U.S. citizens living in poverty. He notes that the current poverty measure does not assess how the poor are faring in relationship to the rest of the U.S. population, thus inhibiting the government’s ability to gauge the usefulness of anti-poverty intervention strategies and programs. He proposes updating the calculations by reducing the food allotment and taking housing, transportation, and healthcare costs into current budget ratios, thus revising federal poverty thresholds that more accurately depict U.S. poverty levels. In addition, a family’s budget for childcare expenses has exponentially increased over the last several decades. A report by Child Care Aware America (CCAA) states that close to 41% of a family’s budget (living at the federal poverty level) would be needed to cover the annual cost of center-based care for a 4-year-old child (Woods, Fraga, Dobbins, & McCready, 2015).

According to Jiang, Ekono, and Skinner (2014), the number of children living in poverty increased by 23% between 2006 and 2012. In 2012, two-thirds, or 66%, of African American children lived in low-income households compared to 32% of White children (Jiang et al., 2014). Of the 66% of African American children who will grow up in low-income households, over half are in single-mother households, and their life circumstances seriously affect their capacity to succeed academically (Cauthen & Fass, 2008). Black family poverty rates vary according to one
or more householders’ level of education. Poverty is inextricably linked to educational attainment. When examining the data for non-high school graduate, single, female-headed households, nearly three out of four were poor in 2009 (Sum & Khatiwada, 2010). Low educational attainment of African American single mothers has contributed to the high incidence of poverty among these households. The higher the mothers’ educational attainment, the lower the risk of living in a low-income or poor household.

Many researchers assert that systemic and structural inequalities—poverty, high unemployment, food insecurity, lack of quality healthcare, housing, and childcare—have not been taken into consideration when U.S. student educational achievement is evaluated (Marsh, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Rothstein, 2004). Social, political, and economic inequalities create a permanent underclass that is fated to live and remain in poverty. The effects of this long history of racial inequality seep into the very foundation of the U.S. educational system. The U.S. K-12 educational system is wrought with educational disparities. According to Noguera (2003), “The educational outcomes of racial minorities and poor children typically have reflected broader patterns of inequality” (p. 42). Researchers have associated living in poverty with negative effects on young children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011; Kozol, 1991; Noguera, 2003; Rothstein, 2004).

**Poverty’s Impact on Children’s Development and Education**

Poverty’s impact on cognitive development is pervasive and disadvantages K-12 students in terms of reading and math achievement and frequently contributes to low school engagement (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011; McLoyd, 1998). Current neuroscience and developmental psychology research point to the impact of childhood poverty and its long-lasting detrimental effects on young children’s social and emotional development, as well as critical brain
development (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Waldfogel (2010) states, “Child poverty has implications not just for hardship in the short-term, but also for long-term health and development” (p. 3). Experiencing extreme poverty, neglect, and abuse in early childhood has an adverse effect on the body’s stress response system, keeping it on high alert, which weakens early brain development and impacts a child’s cognitive and psychological development. Children who grow up in extreme poverty, crime-ridden neighborhoods, high unemployment, drug abuse, and neglect are susceptible to chronic anxiety and fear. Constant exposure to these adverse living conditions can change the structure of a young child’s brain resulting in developmental delays impacting his or her educational pursuits (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

Poverty also has a direct impact on a child’s or youth’s nutritional health by dictating the types of foods the family can afford to provide, which in turn can play an important role in dictating the state of their physical health. Poor nutrition and poor healthcare contribute to children in poverty experiencing social and behavioral problems and developmental delays. Wight, Thampi, and Briggs (2010) assert that infants and toddlers are far more likely to experience developmental risks in food-insecure households. Their report further links food insecurity with chronic illnesses, higher rates of hospitalization, overall poorer health, and lower physical functions. Duncan, Kalil, and Ziol-Guest (2010) similarly document that “Poverty and its attendant stressors have the potential to shape the neurobiology of the developing child in powerful ways, which may lead directly to poorer outcomes later in life” (p. 306). Coleman-Jensen, Nord, and Singh (2013) reported the number of households headed by a single woman that experienced food insecurity was 35.4%, while 24.6% of Black households experienced food insecurity.
Rothstein (2004) argues that low-income families experience poorer health due to lack of affordable quality healthcare which affects their children’s ability to function well academically. If parents are not able to access affordable, quality healthcare, their children sometimes go without basic healthcare needs being addressed (i.e., needing glasses, dental care issues, and undetected health ailments). Low-income students may suffer from poor vision, which can affect reading and comprehension, resulting in being mislabeled as possibly having learning disabilities. Low-income children are also more likely to be exposed to higher levels of lead poisoning than middle-income students due to residing in poor quality housing.

The majority of the residents who were affected by the lead contamination in Flint, Michigan, were low-income and lived in the poorest area of the city (Goodnough & Parker, 2016). Samples of the water supply from late 2015 to the first quarter of 2016 detected lead levels as high as 11,846 parts per billion. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set actionable levels of lead contamination at 15 parts per billion. Dr. Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician treating young children in Flint, Michigan, states that the impact to the approximately 6,000 young children under the age of six who are currently living in Flint, Michigan, and were affected by the lead contamination has yet to be determined. However, lead exposure studies have determined cognitive and behavior impairments are some of the long-term consequences of lead exposure. Lower IQs and poor impulse control issues have also been cited as consequences of long term lead exposure (Hanna-Attisha, 2016; Goodnough & Parker, 2016; Rothstein, 2004).

**The intersection of race and gender.** Inequality resulting from the intersectionality of gender and race has consistently been a mitigating factor in determining women’s life choices. Wage inequality has been a century long battle in which women finally gained some political ground with the 2009 signing into passage of the Libby Ledbetter Fair Pay Act by President
Barack Obama (The White House Blog, 2013). According to U.S. Census data, a typical woman working full time in the U.S. will lose $431,000 over her working lifetime because of the gender pay gap (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Women currently make 77 cents to every male dollar earned (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). African American women face even more severe discrimination, earning a mere 70 cents to every male dollar and 64 cents to every White male’s dollar earned (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Lower wages for women and the current unfavorable economic conditions have been major factors in the increase of single-mother families into poverty. In 2009, single, African American female-headed households with one or more children had a median income of $22,158. Thus, explaining to some extent the fact that close to 50% of the children that grow up in single, African American female-headed households grow up poor (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011).

The rise in African American single-mother households can be linked to many societal conditions. Certain researchers attribute this increase to the fact that women are subjected to unfair wages, lack of educational opportunities for single mothers, poor economic conditions, and single mothers’ struggle to obtain child support from absentee fathers (McLoyd, 1998; Rahmanou & LeMar, 2002). Other researchers also suggest the high incarceration of African American males, welfare reform income requirements, high unemployment rates among African American males, and low-educational attainment of both male and female African American parents as the reasons that have contributed to the increase in single-mother African American households (Anyon, 2005; Marsh, 2011; Polakow, 1993; Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011; Scott, 2011). In 2014, over 71% of African American babies were born to unmarried mothers, more than twice the rate of White babies (29%) and higher than any other racial or ethnic group (Child Trends, 2015a). Additionally, African American babies are more
than twice as likely as White babies to be born to a teen mother (Child Trends, 2015b). Regardless of the causes, the fact remains that as of 2014 66% of African American children were being raised in single-mother households, almost 3 times the percentage of White children (25%), seriously affecting their development and their academic capabilities (Kids Count Data Center, 2016).

The stress of poverty—especially during early childhood when parent/child bonding is critical—can interfere with the development of nurturing parent-child bonds and the formation of positive, supportive parent relationships and practices. High incidences of poverty, lack of quality healthcare, food insecurity, and homelessness have created enormous strain on the African American family. Many children have been removed from their homes for fear of their safety, neglect, and child sexual abuse and placed in foster care. The Children’s Defense Fund reports almost half a million children are in foster care during the course of a year with 360,000 residing in some type of foster care placement (Children’s Defense Fund, 2012b). Foster care placement identifies these students as one of the most at-risk groups regarding educational attainment. The uncertainty and instability in housing placement that some students experience in foster care is faced daily by homeless students.

The National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH; 2008) points out that the United States has the highest number of homeless mothers and children of all industrialized countries, and the lack of affordable housing is a major cause of the rise in family homelessness. In 2013, one out of 30 U.S. children under the age of 18 (2.5 million) experienced homelessness—a record high in the U.S. (Bassuk, Decandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014). Da Costa-Nunez, Adams, and Simonsen-Meehan (2012) report that Black families stay in a homeless shelter at a rate of seven times that of White families.
African Americans continue to be relegated to urban neighborhoods with poor community services, following a long legacy of U.S. housing discrimination. Due to high unemployment of residents, low educational attainment of residents, and fewer community services, these neighborhoods experience high rates of violence, crime, domestic abuse, drug use, and gang violence—factors that can result in a loss of a full academic year among African American K-12 students (Children’s Defense Fund, 2012c; Samel et al., 2011; Scott, 2011).

**Statement of the Problem**

According to Noguera (2003), the inequality that is present in the U.S. public school system is a result of systematic and intrinsic racism, classism, and sexism that have plagued America since its inception. These innate systems of inequality have affected the most vulnerable of society: racial minorities and poor children. Social, political, and economic inequalities create a permanent underclass that frequently perpetuates a cycle of poverty and affects post-secondary educational opportunities.

In 2009, the New York based *Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle* of the Twenty-First Center Foundation commissioned a report by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research on Black girls in New York City. They determined that Black girls experienced special challenges at the elementary and secondary educational level that inhibit their ability to achieve at their highest academic level (Jones-DeWeever, 2009). Some of the research implied teachers focused more on Black girls’ social behaviors and less on their academic performance, suggesting a desire to influence Black girls into more “ladylike” behavior. The report further suggested that over time these actions dampen Black girls’ academic aspirations. Yet despite social, political, and educational odds, some African American female students continue on to pursue their educational goals. What factors influence their academic pursuits? One of the main aims of this
research study was to give recently matriculated, low-income, African American female students a voice in the current educational discourse—an opportunity that has rarely been given.

Post-secondary education and African American female students. For many African American college students, just getting into college is a major challenge in and of itself. Gault, Reichlin, and Roman (2014) report the number of low-income students increased 11% between 2008 and 2012. Seventeen percent of college students have incomes at or below 50% of the federal poverty level (FPL). The lower the student’s income, the more likely he or she is to be financially independent (e.g., no financial support from family members). Almost two-thirds of Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students are financially independent compared with half of White students. Approximately one-fourth of financially independent students have dependent children to care and provide for economically. Nearly three-fourths of African American student parents live at or below 200% of the FPL. African American women represent the highest group of student parents at 47% (Gault et al., 2014). Students of color (with or without dependent children) are more likely to have a zero expected family contribution (EFC) when applying for federal financial aid. A small percentage of low-income student parents actually receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits, although many more are eligible for the financial assistance (Gault et al., 2014). Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, which severely restricted low-income mothers’ access to post-secondary education, college attendance has declined considerably (29–82%) nationwide for single mother participants who have been coerced into mandatory work requirements (Finney, 1998; Polakow, Butler, Deprez, & Kahn, 2004).
The demands of single parenthood and college can be overwhelming for some student parents. Single parent students enrolled in 2003/2004 left school without receiving a degree or certificate by 2008/2009 at double the rate of dependent students (Gault et al., 2014). Race and ethnicity also have a direct correlation to rates of college completion, with Asian women graduating at a rate of 79.6, and White women at 68.3, a rate 11% higher than African American women. Hispanic and African American women complete a degree or certificate within 6 years at a rate of 58.6% and 57.2% respectively (Gault et al., 2014). Attainment of a four-year college degree equates to a 59% increase in income for women. Furthermore, African American women reap the greatest economic benefit, experiencing a 92% increase in income in comparison to other African American female high school graduates (Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS), the rate for African American female students enrolled in college was 9.7% in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Many African American female students have a strong desire to make something of themselves and give back to their communities and, when able to do so, develop a great sense of accomplishment and competence (Matthews-Armstead, 2002; Nobles, 2006). Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (1997) argue that African American female high school students’ academic success is partly due to their acceptance of society’s positive view of education and the associated short-term and long-term academic and social rewards. Educational attainment is viewed as a pathway to social and financial mobility. Some researchers have identified the advancement of the African American community as a whole as the impetus for African American females’ thrust toward post-secondary educational achievement (Arnold, 1993; Hamilton, 1996).
Higher education is one of the clearest pathways out of poverty for many African American students (particularly females) despite the multiple obstacles encountered (Jones-De Weever & Gault, 2006; Polakow, Butler, Deprez, & Kahn, 2004).

Overcoming family instability, poverty, and poorly resourced and funded schools are some of the barriers that African American young women have confronted in their pursuit of post-secondary education. Yet their struggles have frequently been invisible and their voices unheard. Hence this study focuses on in-depth exploration of problematic barriers as well as supports that have contributed to young women’s academic achievement in the face of the many challenges experienced in their families, communities, and urban school settings.

**Purpose, Justification, and Significance**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of low-income, African American young women while focusing on their resilience, persistence, and any manifestation of academic optimism and whether it played a role in their academic success. The construct of academic optimism has previously been applied to schools and educators. This research investigated if the construct of academic optimism could be related to students as well, in this instance, first-year, low-income, African American female college students.

This proposed research study explored low-income, African American female students’ pursuit of their educational goals, their support systems (teachers, counselors, educational administrators, family, and friends) who helped them achieve these goals and the role played by academic optimism. Trust, supportive relationships, and self-efficacy (Smith and Hoy, 2007) were also explored as part of the life histories of low-income, African American female students. In addition, the students’ own perceptions of their resilience and self-efficacy formed a critical part of the study.
My research goal was to explore and understand low-income, African American female students’ educational journeys, which required a commitment to accurately document their lived experiences and the meanings they ascribed to their educational pursuits. Currently, there is limited knowledge about the public schooling experiences of African American female students. Owens, Bryant, and Thomas (2013) discuss a disconnect between African American female students and the majority of White teachers and support staff in public schools and suggest the need for more women of color in school support positions to give “specific attention to African American girls’ cultural context” (p. 220). In addition, McGinty (1999) has suggested “Successful schooling is shaped by students’ positive relationships with teachers” (p. 13).

My research participants’ narratives illuminated the rich, meaningful tapestry of family life, love, and support from caring and compassionate adults, academic hopes, and life goals, which lit the students’ pathways at various turning points in their young lives. The narratives of the low-income, African American women who participated in this research study displayed an openness and honesty in their life histories, which revealed some heartbreaking stories of parental abandonment, parental neglect, parental verbal and mental abuse, parental drug addictions, parental incarceration, poverty, and homelessness, which directly impacted the quality of life of the study’s participants.

Documenting and analyzing the life histories and the academic journeys of low-income, African American female college students fills a gap in the educational literature by focusing on participants’ perspectives and illuminates their obstacles and their support systems thereby contributing to a multifaceted understanding of the complexities of post-secondary educational access and retention. It is hoped that this will provide a unique and timely contribution to the current educational discourse.
Research Questions

In order to explore and understand the lived experiences of low-income, first-year, African American female college students and their educational journeys, the following research questions were formulated:

• What life history experiences have shaped low-income, African American women in their pursuit of higher education?

• What are the complex factors that have supported their resilience and academic persistence despite multiple barriers and obstacles?

• Has academic optimism played a role in the lives of low-income, African American female college students and, if so, how has it impacted their educational aspirations?

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework that sparked interest in the topic of this study is embedded in the construct of academic optimism (Hoy, 2012; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2006). In addition, social capital theory has shaped the framing of the study. However, consistent with a qualitative study, these frameworks serve only as conceptual guideposts. Two main theories developed by Bandura and Adams (1977) and Bandura (1997), social cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory, form the theoretical framework for the construct of academic optimism. Bandura advances, through his social cognitive theory, the realization that learning takes place in a social context and people are responsible and capable for their own self-development. According to Bandura, social cognitive theory involves three forms of human agency. Agency contains “the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions” that are mobilized by the motivation of a human being engaged in the mobility of life instead of choosing to remain stagnant in their life situation (Bandura, 2001, p. 1).
Social capital theory, defined by Loury (1977), refers to “the set of resources that are inherent in family relations and in community social organizations and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person” (p. 45). Coleman et al.’s (1966) study indicated that minority students started school with a deficit in home-based educational resources and, by the end of their secondary education, possessed a deficit in educational opportunities and social capital due to educational inequity of resources between urban schools and more affluent suburban schools. Coleman’s study findings point to deficits in Bandura’s social learning theory (1993) that posits humans learn what they believe they are capable of learning, without considering the critical role played by school inequity.

Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of social capital theory explains the academic deficits exhibited in public education. Bourdieu observed a type of social capital osmosis, which occurs within succeeding generations of the dominant class, erecting an invisible but real barrier to attainment of social capital by low-income or marginalized groups. He points out in his analysis of social capital its restrictive aspects in relation to a person’s gender, race, and class status. Both Coleman (1966) and Maeroff (1998) emphasize the generational nature of social capital acquisition through personal relationships that marginalized people utilize to obtain social capital; and Putnam (1993) argues that social capital becomes a collective attribute of specific groups within society. African American students who increase their social capital through influential relationships with teachers, school counselors, school leaders, and mentors gain knowledge of the academic requirements for educational success and mobility, thus increasing their individual agency. As a theoretical construct undergirding this study, both individual agency and the educational and social settings in which agency is manifested must be taken into account.
The low-income, African American female students who are the participants in this research study are examples of human agency in action. Despite having encountered the obstacles of poverty, parental neglect and abuse, and parental abandonment, they have not wallowed in their pain and heartache. Instead, they continued to forge a path towards educational achievement in the face of the enormous obstacles they have dealt with and/or are still dealing with. The three forms of agency that comprise social cognitive theory are “direct personal agency, proxy agency that relies on others to act on one’s behest to secure desired outcomes, and collective agency exercised through socially coordinative and interdependent effort” (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). The narratives of the study’s participants demonstrated direct personal agency within social contexts. Numerous incidents are documented, demonstrating participants’ ability to adapt to life situations and readjust their attitudes and behaviors to accommodate their new life circumstances.

Research pertaining to optimism, conducted by positive psychologist Seligman (2006), also contributed to the development of the construct of academic optimism (Hoy et al., 2006). Seligman (2006) posits that students will learn better through methods that advance a positive approach to learning. Students can be taught techniques and methods to increase their individual happiness, thereby increasing the possibilities for learning. Seligman asserts optimism can be learned through a series of exercises and techniques, scaffolding onto the tenets of Bandura’s self-efficacy theory. Seligman’s assertions are key to the interpretation of optimism in the construct of academic optimism developed by Hoy et al. (2006).

Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), is a belief in one’s (individual) or a group’s (collective) capabilities to exercise control over a situation or circumstances based on their perceived skills. Self-efficacy skills are increased through a series of life events that either help
to strengthen one’s belief in the ability to produce a desired outcome through one’s own actions or are diminished by a lack of agency (Bandura, 2001). The low-income, African American female college students who are participants in this qualitative research study made the decision to keep moving forward towards their post-secondary educational goals, inspired by the promise of a better and brighter future despite the family dysfunctions they may have experienced, the economic barriers they have navigated, or the various obstacles they encountered along their educational journeys.

The construct of academic optimism is a significant theoretical framework relevant to this qualitative research study. Academic optimism is composed of three factors: academic emphasis, trust, and collective efficacy (Hoy et al., 2006). Academic emphasis refers to the academic effort that is exercised to achieve successful schooling outcomes. The component of trust encompasses the relational trust between the teachers and the students, the teachers and parents, and the teachers and the school administrators. The quality and level of trust that exist within a school are indicative of its academic achievement. Collective efficacy beliefs are the adhesive that clasps the other two factors and interact to create academic optimism in successful schools. The construct of academic optimism has previously been applied in quantitative research studies. The construct of academic optimism was applied to teachers’ pedagogy by Woolfolk-Hoy (2012), who determined teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs, teachers’ trust of students and parents, and teachers’ academic emphasis were the three components that formulated teachers’ academic optimism. A recent quantitative study conducted by Tschannen-Moran, Bankole, Mitchell, and Moore, Jr. (2013) confirmed student academic optimism. Tschannen-Moran et al.’s study’s findings indicate the variables of students’ trust in teachers, academic press, and the students’ identification with their school combined to create student academic optimism.
My study explores the meaning of academic optimism within a qualitative research paradigm, focusing on the facilitators and barriers that contribute to the development of educational persistence among low-income, first-year, African American female college students. Such students are rarely given “voice” to express and articulate the struggles they navigate in order to pursue their academic aspirations.

**Chapter Organization**

This dissertation comprises seven chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction to the research, its purpose, and background information about the research problem. Chapter 2 reviews the interdisciplinary literature pertaining to the topic and research questions. Chapter 3 discusses the rationale for the use of a life history approach and methodological procedures. Chapters 4 and 5 present the research participants’ narratives. Chapter 6 follows with a thematic analysis of the narrative data. Chapter 7 discusses implications of the study, recommendations, and suggestions for future study.
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

The literature relating to the construct of academic optimism encompasses the concepts of self-efficacy, relational trust, academic emphasis, and social belief systems. The intersection of race, gender, and class and its triangulation effect on the educational outcomes of low-income, African American female students inform this literature review.

Educational Disparities That Affect African American Students’ Academic Outcomes

During the past fifteen years, educational policy in the United States has focused on greater student and teacher accountability, culminating with President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and President Obama’s Race to the Top legislation. This has resulted in many school administrators, teachers, and students focusing on preparing for statewide assessments to ensure compliance with federal regulations that direct these nationwide academic incentives (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Students in urban school districts do not receive equitable educational access and resources, nor are they afforded the same educational opportunities as students in suburban school districts (Schraw, 2010).

Students in the United States fared only average in international achievement tests, ranking 14th out of 34 other democratic countries in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study released in 2010. The release of this study created an incentive to improve the quality of the U.S. educational system and help prepare its students for the current global economy (West, 2012). Kirby and DiPaola (2011) reasoned that the push towards globalization has increased the need for students to perform well academically, and educators should be vigilantly seeking solutions to the U.S. educational dilemma that has resulted in educational disparities among its rich and poor, urban and suburban student populations. The Bush Administration in 2002 enacted NCLB supposedly
to help alleviate some of the educational disparities that existed between urban and suburban school districts across the U.S. However, the punitive actions associated with failing to meet these mandates has resulted in greater educational disparities occurring within urban and suburban school districts and an increase in the achievement gap between White and non-White (particularly African American) students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lipmann, 2011; Scott, 2011). The culmination of the NCLB legislation through the passage of the Every Child Achieves Act (ECAA) is an indication of the U.S. Senate’s awareness of the ineffective and punitive nature of the NCLB legislation and its inability to produce any authentic transformations within the U.S. public educational system (Walker, 2015).

The educational disparities that currently exist in the U.S. public school system affect African American students even more so when gender and economic status are taken into consideration; hence their experiences may facilitate illumination of areas of redress. This reasoning leads to the need to critically appraise the issues that affect urban youth, thereby identifying and proposing legislation and programs that may offset the educational disparities that have plagued urban youth, urban communities, urban schools, and urban teachers for decades. What are the factors that contribute to urban students’ academic achievement in the face of the many challenges that affect them in their urban school setting? Understanding the factors that promote student academic achievement, with specific attention paid to students who may be marginalized for various reasons, can be very useful in improving student retention rates and assisting students in achieving their educational goals.

Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, and Patterson (2011) argue that the obstacles to academic achievement prevalent in urban school communities are poverty and high unemployment as well as the low educational attainment of community residents (i.e., parents). Others issues that affect
school performance are poor behavior, retention due to attendance and/or academic performance, the availability and the ability to participate in extracurricular activities, and low student morale regarding educational expectations and aspirations. The identification of key characteristics of student success includes the teacher’s belief about the student, the student’s problem solving ability, and communication skills (Samel et al., 2011). The importance of external supports was also identified (e.g., the family, community, and positive academic relationships) as having a positive effect on student academic achievement. The study’s findings stated that providing multiple options for catching up when falling behind academically, identifying attendance issues and resolving them if possible, and teachers’ awareness of their expectations of students were all elements contributing to student success.

**Post-Secondary Educational Disparities**

Graduation rates in the U.S. have steadily increased at four-year universities between 2003 and 2013, from 56.0% to 59.4%, an increase of 3.4% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The Education Trust issued a recent report by Eberle-Sudré, Welch, and Nichols (2015) titled *Rising Tide: Do College Grad Rate Gains Benefit All Students?* The researchers examined completion rates for Whites and minority students at public and private nonprofit four-year universities and determined that the greatest completion gains were at public four-year universities with a 4.9% increase in graduation rates compared to private nonprofit four-year universities, which experienced only a 2.3% increase. The report states that Latino students experienced the greatest gains in college completion with a rate of 7.4%, and African American students experienced the lowest gains at 4.4%.

Although African American women have doubled their college enrollment rates in the last three decades, their graduation completion rates trail behind their White and Asian female
counterparts when completion rates at all post-secondary institutions (community colleges, public universities, and private nonprofit universities) are considered (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

Walpole, Chambers, and Goss (2014) found African American women who attend community college as their first post-secondary institution have a lower completion rates than their African American male peers and other (White, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander) female peers. However, the researchers determined that if African American women were successful in completing their community college course requirements and continued on to complete their Bachelor’s degrees at four-year universities, they were back on par with African American males and their other female peers for completion of a graduate degree.

Walker, Pearson, and Murrell (2010) studied the quality of effort and career preparations of White and African American community college students. The female and male African American community college students in the study demonstrated increased efforts to interact with faculty members, which improved their opportunities for career preparedness over their White male and female community college peers. This was attributed to their intense attempts to form student-faculty relationships and connections with their higher status peers, consequently utilizing educational strategies that have been proven to contribute to the building of social capital in minority students (Garcia-Reid, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

The Construct of Academic Optimism

African Americans have long held the belief that education is the pathway to freedom and for centuries have fought to gain the right to fair and equal educational opportunities. Positive psychologist Seligman (2006) states that while possessing the characteristics of talent and motivation is important, possessing optimism can compensate for the lack of talent and motivation: “Those who are optimistic tend not to feel helpless when bad things happen…” [They
become energized encountering the everyday setbacks as well as momentous defeats” (p. 16) and he argues that one can learn to be optimistic.

Another factor that has been identified as having a positive effect on academic achievement is the student’s sense of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) posits students may perform poorly either because they lack the skills or do not believe themselves capable of performing the skill successfully. Students who believe they have the skills to accomplish their goals usually do so. According to Bandura self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own capacity to achieve desired outcomes. He states:

Efficacy beliefs play an influential mediational role in academic attainment. The extent to which such factors as level of cognitive ability, prior educational preparation and attainment, gender, and attitudes toward academic activities influence academic performance is partly dependent on how much they affect efficacy beliefs. (1997, p. 216)

Gibson and Dembo (1984) frequently referred to Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy construct in direct relation to their research on teacher efficacy as their findings corresponded to Bandura’s two-factor model of self-efficacy. Most psychologists posit that what a person believes will happen, will most likely occur, thus alluding to the fact that the outcome is contingent on a given behavior in accordance with Bandura’s self-efficacy construct. The relationship between a student and teacher and the student’s perception of this relationship can influence the student’s academic success. Teachers’ beliefs in their ability to teach and reach all of their students constitute the core for the construct of teacher efficacy according to Gibson and Dembo (1984).

Gibson and Dembo (1984) propose that future research should be directed towards the area of teachers’ sense of efficacy, since teachers’ beliefs have been linked to students’ academic achievement (Hoy, 2010). According to Gibson and Dembo (1984), the two factors that
correspond to Bandura’s self-efficacy research are that a person can determine his/her own outcomes and develop the skills needed to construct one’s own positive outcomes. Gibson and Dembo’s (1984) findings regarding teachers’ efficacy are consistent with Bandura’s self-efficacy theory. Of the teacher participants in their study, the teachers deemed highly effective demonstrated high levels of teacher efficacy. The teachers who believed that they could make a difference in their students’ academic endeavors did so, and those who were deemed less effective reported low scores on the Teacher Efficacy Scale, resulting in scores of low teacher efficacy. The researchers stressed the necessity for further research to observe teacher efficacy in relation to situational and organizational variables.

Beard, Hoy, and Woolfolk-Hoy (2010) answered Gibson and Dembo’s (1984) call for further research on teacher efficacy and determined that teacher efficacy was a part of a threefold academic collective that generated and confirmed a new construct termed academic optimism. Numerous researchers have confirmed academic optimism as a collective characteristic of effective schools when controlling for students’ socioeconomic status and previous student achievement (Beard et al., 2010; Hoy, 2012). Academic optimism has emerged from positive psychology’s focus on “areas of human experience that include well-being, hope, and fulfillment…or humanistic psychology” (Beard et al., 2010, p. 1136). Bandura’s social cognitive and self-efficacy theories (1986, 1997), Coleman’s social capital theory (1990), and Seligman’s learned optimism study (1998) frame the theoretical foundation for the construct of academic optimism (Beard et al., 2010). Beard et al. (2010) posit that the school characteristics of academic optimism would be identified in other countries and it has been. Several researchers have conducted research globally to investigate the construct of academic optimism (Ekeh & Njoku, 2014; Ngidi, 2012; Wu, Hoy, & Tarter, 2013).
Smith and Hoy (2007) identify three factors that when interconnected, create a threefold effect to facilitate and produce academic optimism in schools. The first factor is academic emphasis. When schools’ focus is strongly on academic achievement and all parties (i.e., teachers, administrators, parents, and students) strive towards high academic achievement, it has been shown to increase student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000). The second factor is faculty trust in parents and students. The third factor that facilitates creating academic optimism is collective efficacy. Smith and Hoy (2007) delineate three sets of efficacy beliefs that when combined in the school setting create collective efficacy: teacher belief in the school as whole, students’ self-efficacy beliefs, and teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs. These three factors collectively intertwine and develop as key characteristics of successful schooling. Smith and Hoy (2007) posit, after controlling for socioeconomic status and previous academic school levels, that these factors have a positive effect on student achievement and creating teachers’ academic optimism. The researchers suggest that academic optimism is not related to socioeconomic status. They state that when controlling for socioeconomic status and previous achievement, academic optimism as a characteristic of school organization has a direct positive effect on academic achievement. However, Kirby and DiPaola (2011) point out that low-income students in urban school settings have lower levels of academic optimism, thus concluding that students’ socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of their student achievement. However, the researchers accede community engagement along with academic optimism promotes higher levels of academic achievement.

Hoy et al. (2006) focus on identifying academic optimism and utilizing it to explain academic achievement. The authors challenge Coleman et al.’s (1966) assertion that schools were not the primary factor in contributing to students’ academic achievement. However, the
researchers concede that researchers have no direct evidence of a link between school leadership, or other school characteristics, and student academic achievement, disputing the Coleman report (1966). However, some research points to school leadership having an indirect, supportive effect on students’ academic achievement. School administrators who support teachers’ instructional efforts and provide a safe, trusting school environment contribute to students’ academic achievement (Hoy et al., 2006). The researchers claim that three distinct characteristics emerge that have not been previously identified despite continuous research into the characteristics of students’ academic achievement. The three characteristics that are present, according to the study’s findings, in successful school environments are academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students. The academic emphasis of a school refers to the amount of determination a school possesses towards achieving scholastic success. Schools’ academic emphasis centers on the school staff’s ability to create a safe, stimulating, focused learning environment. A school’s ability to create a sense of academic excellence in the staff, parents, and teachers helps facilitate its academic emphasis. School administrators, teachers, and parents set high academic goals for their students that are attainable. Students are engaged in the learning process, and disciplinary issues are reduced because of this emphasis on academics. Consequently, there is no downtime for students to engage in destructive activities.

Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp (1991) state “The challenge is to create school conditions in which teachers believe they are up to the task and so are their students” (p. 441). However, the researchers fail to address the issue of inequality in urban school districts and the challenge urban teachers face when little to no academic resources are available to assist their teaching efforts. The researchers suggest that comparative case studies should be conducted identifying schools with low and high academic optimism. The researchers conclude that when all three
factors of academic optimism are present in a school, community engagement is positively affected. Academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and trust in parents and students (the three factors of academic optimism) are in beneficial and reciprocal relationships and, when present, help to improve student achievement and create the construct of academic optimism.

Characteristics that create teachers’ academic optimism. Beard, Hoy, and Woolfolk-Hoy’s (2010) focus is not on schools’ academic optimism. The researchers have applied the collective characteristic of academic optimism to an individual construct: teachers’ academic optimism. What collective characteristics comprise teachers’ academic optimism? The researchers’ findings indicate that teacher efficacy, teachers’ trust in parents and students, and teachers’ sense of academic emphasis collectively interact to construct teachers’ academic optimism. The study concludes that teachers who possess a high level of optimism in general translate that into their pedagogy, stating, “A personal disposition to be optimistic should provide a propensity toward academic optimism” (Beard et al., 2010, p. 1138). The study also concluded that an enabling school structure was conducive and promotes academic optimism in the teaching staff. Schools that employ teachers who possess academic optimism improve trust between teachers, parents, and students and help to motivate students to strive for academic achievement.

The construct of academic optimism has also been applied to teachers by research conducted by Woolfolk-Hoy (2012). The work of Woolfolk-Hoy (2012) scaffolds the work of Hoy and Tarter (2011) regarding academic optimism and concludes that all factors combine to create academic optimism; collective faculty efficacy, collective faculty trust, and academic emphasis can all be applied to teachers’ pedagogy and the construct of academic optimism. According to Woolfolk-Hoy (2012), “This construct encompasses teachers’ beliefs about
themselves, their students, and their instruction” (p. 93). Woolfolk-Hoy posits that the Teachers Sense of Efficacy Scales (TSES) developed to determine and measure teacher efficacy can accurately assess teachers’ motivation and cooperation. Woolfolk-Hoy (2012) theorizes “being more academically optimistic allows teachers to set goals for themselves and their students that are specific and challenging, the kind of goals that support achievement” (p. 95).

Ngidi’s (2012) South African-based study, investigating academic optimism as an individual teacher belief and not just a school characteristic, was conducted in the province of KwaZulu-Natal’s four regions with a random selection of four schools from each region, totaling 16 schools and 280 teacher participants. The study determined teacher participants did differ in the extent of their academic optimism; however, teachers’ utilization of student-centered pedagogy, their own optimistic dispositions, and their classroom management skills were positively related to individual teacher academic optimism. These findings were in agreement with those of Knoblauch and Hoy (2008). One finding of the study contrary to Knoblauch and Hoy (2008) was the indication that there was no relationship between individual teacher’s academic optimism and their classroom management ability. The study conclusively stated that the three predictors of teachers’ individual academic optimism were student-centered teaching beliefs (self-efficacy), teacher’s willingness to go the extra mile for the student, and their level of optimism (dispositional optimism) coming into the teaching field.

Kirby and DiPaola (2011) examined the intersecting relationships among academic optimism, community engagement, and student achievement in urban elementary schools in southeastern Virginia. Kirby and DiPaola’s study’s aim was to determine if academic optimism of urban teachers and community engagement are positively related to their students’ achievement. Also, they sought to determine if the three collective factors of academic optimism
(academic emphasis, trust, and collective efficacy) are positively related to community engagement of urban elementary schools and predict student achievement in urban elementary schools. The study’s participants consisted of 1,295 teachers from 35 urban elementary schools. The findings of the study indicated an inverse relationship between students’ economic level and schools’ level of academic optimism. The higher the percentage of student poverty, the lower the level of the schools’ academic optimism. The findings of the study directly contradict Hoy’s (2012) research findings positing academic optimism, when identified in a school setting, is an indicator of student achievement regardless of the socioeconomic status of the student body. The study identifies teachers’ belief in students’ academic abilities as a great influence on their academic success.

Tschannen-Moran et al.’s (2013) study was the first of its kind to identify three factors that created student academic optimism: student trust, academic press, and student identification with school. The study leaned on the foundational base of academic optimism to explore the factors that contributed to students’ academic optimism. Student trust was defined as having a secure and caring relationship between the student and teacher. Academic press involved the students having a sense of academic initiative and believing that their school valued their academic efforts by providing “an academically oriented environment where goals and expectations were high” (p. 154). And thirdly, students’ identification with school was determined by the students’ “sense of belonging,” their reciprocal commitment to the school and the school to them. The construct of academic optimism has been identified and explored in successful K-12 schools, teachers’ pedagogy, and students’ academic achievement with very little attention paid to post-secondary education settings. Woolfolk-Hoy (2012) notes the absence of post-secondary educational studies that explore the construct of academic optimism and
suggests that the creation of an educational environment enlisting the three components of academic optimism (academic emphasis, faculty trust, and collective efficacy) may increase post-secondary students’ academic motivation and promote high academic standards, collaboration between faculty and students, and resilience within the student body.

The studies to date on academic optimism have been conducted using primarily quantitative research methods. In contrast, this dissertation study is qualitative, exploring the construct of academic optimism in relation to the schooling experiences of low-income, first-year, African American, female college students. The intersection of race, gender, and class were critical factors that emerged in the study and are directly relevant to the creation of academic capital in the lives of marginalized students.

**Social Capital and Racial Identity**

African American sociologist, W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term “double consciousness” referring to “This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one soul’s by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1903/1994, p. 2). Some African American girls and young women, conscious of a double standard and negative perceptions about them, rebel against racial and social duplicity through their actions and words. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) argue that living in a society that constantly perpetrates negative stereotypes of African American girls and women can damage their sense of self-esteem and self-worth. The researchers further expound, “Stereotypes based on race, gender, and social class make it hard to trust oneself and to trust others who look or behave like you do” (p. 4). Sirin and Fine (2007), in their discussion of Muslim-American youth and identity, analyze the experience of “hyphenated selves” of youths that live in a society that
simultaneously promotes their civic participation, while conversely restricting their social and economic mobility based on socio-political events, historical practices, and ethnic discrimination.

Many African American female college students have faced challenges based on race, gender, and class divisions. They have learned to navigate both environments (home and school) in their college environments. Their “hyphenated selves” learn to cope and in some instances thrive in both environments despite the many challenges of urban life and the educational disparities they experienced in their urban schools.

Social capital theory (Loury, 1977) examines the family, social, and community resources that promote children’s academic and social development and their engagement in school and community life. Coleman (1988) asserts that creating relationships that result in acquiring access to resources and needed assistance produces positive outcomes and constitutes the essence of social capital. Coleman’s earlier work in the 1960s emphasized the unequal starting points for poor and minority children who began school as disadvantaged and whose educational trajectories continued to become more unequal as a consequence of restricted access and educational opportunities (Coleman et al., 1966). Coleman’s findings may also relate to students’ ability to participate in extracurricular activities, which has been indirectly linked to improving school academic achievement. There are many reasons why students do and do not participate in extracurricular activities. Most students who do participate have higher socioeconomic status than students who do not, corresponding to Coleman’s findings. The reasons are mainly financially motivated. Many low-income parents and students cannot afford the fees and costs associated with organized extracurricular activities. Low-income parents, according to Covay and Carbonara (2010), may indeed care about their child’s participation in organized extracurricular activities, but financial restraints may be what prohibit their child’s
ability to participate, not lack of interest. Covay and Carbonara found extracurricular activities improve students’ non-cognitive skills and contribute positively to academic achievement.

Lareau (2003), in her book *Unequal Childhoods*, analyzes how social class divides parents with two distinct parenting styles. *Concerted cultivation* refers to middle class parents who donate their time and money into providing extracurricular activities for their children, mainly organized sports and music instruction, while low-income parents rely on a more hands-off, laid-back approach to parenting Lareau terms *accomplishment of natural growth*. Clearly concerted cultivation is directly related to the building of social capital.

Social capital, or the lack thereof, illustrates the achievement gap’s wide aperture between low-income students and their high-income counterparts. According to Maeroff (1998), the educational, social, and economic disparities between students can be linked to low-income students’ minimum exposure to cultural, educational, and social experiences. He argues that focusing on four main dimensions of students’ school lives can facilitate social capital: connectedness, well-being, a sense of knowing, and academic initiative. The sense of *connectedness* between the school and the students’ home environment would help to provide the educational support that low-income students need to achieve academically. Maeroff (1998) claims that children in poverty “know neither what they are missing nor where to turn to get it, an affliction apt to continue throughout the duration of their schooling” (p. 426) and insists this state of affliction will persist without the concerted effort to increase their system knowledge and sense of *knowing* about the structures in which they live and study. Maeroff terms the third sense, a sense of *well-being* that is instrumental in ensuring low-income students gain feelings of trust and confidence deemed necessary to engage academically. Attending to low-income students’ sense of *well-being, connectedness* to their school environment and increasing ways of *knowing*
leads to achieving a sense of academic initiative. Maeroff asserts that achieving a sense of academic initiative is an important turning point in increasing social capital because it denotes the student is developing academic aspirations. Increasing social capital will improve educational opportunities and create positive social cognitive beliefs in low-income students.

Social capital, according to Bourdieu (1984), results from an intrinsic, reciprocal social system propagated through a type of relational osmosis. Social benefits and advantages are bestowed on community members through insight and knowledge of intricate economic and cultural networks that cultivate, nurture, and maintain middle class and elite economic privilege and social standing. These systems of knowledge and advantage are manifested within social organizations, such as educational institutions, which reward students based on their acquired cultural and social capital: “The more the competencies measured are recognized by the school system and the more academic the techniques used to measure them, the stronger is the relation between performance and educational qualifications” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 13).

Stanton-Salazar (1997) identifies key individuals in social groups, cultural groups, and social institutions—such as schools—as institutional agents. These institutional agents are gatekeepers of valuable resources and information that students, who lack social capital, especially low-income minority students, need to create and maintain relationships with in order to build their social capital. According to Stanton-Salazar (1997) there are six main forms of knowledge minority students should master. They are as follows: 1) adapting one’s speech to the audience being addressed; 2) being academically competent through knowledge of one’s academic subjects; 3) knowing the various gatekeepers and their academic standing and the knowledge they possess; 4) cultivating networking skills through participation in social organizations, resourceful relationships with institutional agents, and academically successful
peers; 5) utilizing computer skills academically and cultivating academic emphasis through the development of new scholarly skills; and 6) learning how to overcome academic, financial, and social barriers through persistence and resilience by developing contacts to enhance employment and educational opportunities.

Building social capital, as Maeroff (1998) asserts, takes a concerted effort by students, in particular minority students, who are motivated to achieve their academic goals. Brewster and Bowen (2004) found female Latino students who possessed social capital through the development of meaningful relationships with teachers and parents experienced positive school engagement. Although their work focused on a distinct population of minority students, their research findings are also applicable to low-income, African American female students.

The acquisition of social capital by minority students does not guarantee access by institutional agents (teachers, school administrators, coaches, and other school support staff), just the opportunity for access. The action of converting social capital through relationships with institutional agents into positive educational outcomes (e.g., post-secondary educational status) is, in itself, a form of agency. African American students gain agency and self-efficacy skills, persistence, and resilience by overcoming barriers to their academic success.

**Social belief systems.** Several researchers have examined African American college students’ social cognitive beliefs (i.e., self-efficacy and outcome expectations) as possible factors affecting academic achievement (Allen 1998; DeFreitas, 2012; White, 1998). Their research identifies a connection between African American college students’ negative outcome expectations, stemming from information provided by family and friends, as well as past racial micro-aggressions in school. Research has linked African American college students’ racial identities with their socioeconomic status, social class, and any previous racial bias experiences
(Allen, 2001; White, 1998). These prior experiences of racial bias may predispose students to rise above negative outcomes and motivate them to persevere (Allen, 2001; O’Connor, 1997).

In addition to racial bias and microaggressions, other factors have contributed to African Americans’ academic achievement or, in some cases, the lack thereof, especially in comparison to other non-African American students. Castro and Rice (2003) determined that African American college students perform less well academically in comparison to their White counterparts in college. Researchers have utilized social cognitive theory (SCT) as a conceptual framework to evaluate the differences in academic achievement between the African American college students and their White counterparts (Brady-Amoon & Fluertes, 2010; DeFreitas, 2012).

Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1986) is also applicable in attempting to understand this phenomenon. Bandura (1986) contends that social cognitive theory identifies a complex structure of causal relationships that are developed through gradually applying learned skills, which develop competencies in individuals, allowing for the evaluation of their actions, which informs their future actions.

Social cognitive theory posits that learning takes place within a social context. This assessment can be applied to the institutional structure of schools. Students interact and learn in a social context. They are both influencing and affecting social context within the school setting through interactions, cognitive interpretations, and relational influences. Social Capital theory infers that personal goals are accomplished through a network of social relationships and interactions. Achieving goals or objectives creates a positive self-concept, increases one’s social capital, and develops feelings of optimism. An individual’s belief that desirable future outcomes will result is termed optimism. Learned optimism, according to Seligman (2006), can be taught,
and he argues the earlier, the better, as learned optimism is created through a history of encouragement, which in turn, helps to develop internal optimism.

Scheier, Carver, and Bridges (1994) clearly delineate the difference between optimism and self-mastery, defining self-mastery as the belief that “one is under the perception that one exerts control over the events of one’s life,” whereas optimism is defined “as having generalized expectancies for future outcomes, without one’s personal control affecting those outcomes” (p. 1064). The delineation of self-mastery is important, particularly as the capacity to control one’s life can be misleading. Many low-income people, especially African American and other minorities, have little ability to control their life circumstances. High unemployment, high crime, low-quality housing, and low-quality childcare are some of the circumstances of their lives they are powerless to change (Samel et al., 2011). Poverty’s clutch is unrelenting, and it is frequently hard to break free. However, optimism transcends the consideration of one’s current circumstances. It delves into the realm of possibilities and provides an opportunity to explore how low-income, African American female college students have demonstrated optimism in the face of systems of structured racial bias and inequality. These theories contribute to the framework of academic optimism, which is found in successful schools that facilitate academic achievement in the schools’ student body. However, not every student is successful academically.

Bandura (1997) posits students may perform poorly either because they lack the skills or do not believe themselves capable of performing successfully. Conversely, students who believe that they have the skills to accomplish their goals usually do so. Many low-income, African American female college students have struggled with and overcome financial, social, emotional, educational, familial, single motherhood, and environmental hurdles to attend college. Young, low-income, African American women who survive life’s various obstacles and seize the
opportunity to attend college have become adept at regulating their actions to obtain their goals; in this case, the pursuit of post-secondary educational attainment. Several researchers report that low-income, African American female students share a collective belief that the pursuit of a post-secondary education will improve their life’s chances (Allen, 2001; O’Connor, 1997).

**Self-efficacy.** One factor seen as having a positive effect on academic achievement is the student’s sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy—the belief in one’s own abilities to achieve wanted outcomes—according to Bandura (1997), comes from “mastery of experiences, social persuasion and feedback, and physiological arousal, and vicarious experiences” (p. 217). Bandura (1997) posits that efficacy beliefs are a significant factor in academic attainment. According to Bandura, secondary factors such as cognitive ability level, gender, academic performance, and attitudes affect efficacy beliefs, and he argues that self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of academic achievement. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own ability to navigate life’s ups and downs while managing to produce positive outcomes.

According to Shin (2011) the negative effects of racial stereotypes are minimized with the integration of traditional African American cultural values as a part of the emotional and academic development of African American students. Shin (2011) denoted a relationship between “Afrocentric values” and “academic self-efficacy” in African American school children.

Jonson-Reid, Davis, Saunders, Williams, and Williams (2005) discuss school-based intervention programs operate under the assumption that academic success is linked to a student’s self-esteem and argue that academic success is directly linked to students’ self-efficacy beliefs. Jonson-Reid et al. (2005) stress the importance of increasing the students’ perception of the intrinsic value of education. Self-efficacy skills can be taught and mastered over time, helping students to improve their academic achievement. Efficacy beliefs are one of the
components of academic optimism. Students who exhibit resilience and self-efficacy possess human agency.

**Agency.** Agency is central to understanding how and why low-income, African American students persist in their pursuit of higher education. Social cognitive theory, as defined by Bandura (2001), posits three modes of agency. Important characteristics of agency are the acts of intention and forethought, along with the ability to self-reflect on one’s life choices and capabilities and to function socially in society while bringing meaning to one’s life (Bandura, 2001). Human competencies, according to Bandura (1997), “Are developed and manifested in many forms. These diverse areas of functioning demand different knowledge and skills” (p. 36). African Americans have developed a unique set of coping skills ever since the African Diaspora that took place approximately 400 years ago. African Americans have lived through a long and sinister history of discrimination and witnessing their elders struggle against racism, Jim Crow laws, institutional racism, and unfair labor and housing practices while still making something out of nothing through faith and hard work.

Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams, and Wiklund’s (2002) Hope theory states that students who conceptualize their educational goals, along with determining what strategies to utilize to obtain these goals (pathways), and utilize “agency”—the motivation to achieve these goals—possess high hope and have a greater chance of achieving their academic goals than students who possess a lower level of hope. The researchers determined a direct connection between agency and students’ ability to develop and identify strategies to achieve their educational goals. Students who exhibit resilience and self-efficacy skills also exhibit human agency.
**Resilience.** Children in poverty can be exposed to risks associated with their environment, or protective factors may reduce or negate those risks. This may determine whether children acquire vulnerability or strength and competencies that result in resilience (Felner, 2005). Resilience is defined by Evans-Winters (2011) as “the ability to recover from or adjust to problems, adversities, and stress” (p. 23). Abelev (2009) identifies three domains of protective factors—families, communities, and schools—that facilitate resiliency in African American students. Brown (2008), discussing the resilience of African American students, narrows the protective factors into two categories: racial socialization and social support networks. Racial socialization consists of positive messages regarding African American culture and heritage, modeling of positive behaviors, and positive environments that help to positively influence African American students (Thorton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). Social support networks consist of having the support of another person (e.g., immediate and external family members, peers, and community members). According to Brown (2008), emotional support from immediate family members can contribute to African American adolescents’ academic achievement.

Jordan (2005) states that girls who are under high levels of stress and anxiety may engage in caretaking activities. They create support systems through relationships, often with other females friends. A study of 12,000 adolescents conducted by Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, and Jones (1997) identified the presence of a supportive relationship with a teacher, parent, or mentor as a good indicator of a student’s ability to avoid risky behaviors and develop resilience.

Luthar, Cicchet and Becker (2000) describe the concept of resilience in students as “the ability of young people to withstand the many obstacles and conditions that get in the way of
their progress and development” (p. 556). Determining which academic programs, school relationships, and academic activities help to foster resilience and academic optimism in urban students could help to reduce the high school dropout rate among urban students and increase academic achievement. It is equally important to identify the barriers to academic achievement. Other factors have been identified as having a positive effect on academic achievement. Students’ academic relationships with their teachers have been identified as having a positive influence on student achievement. Students’ familial relationships have also been identified as a motivating factor in improving and maintaining academic achievement. In addition Bryan (2005) argues that schools, families, and communities that unite and form educational partnerships create protective barriers for low-income students that assist them with navigating through roadblocks on their academic journeys.

**Persistence.** Butler-Barnes, Chavous, Hurd, and Varner (2013) report African American adolescents’ academic persistence is formed by the protective factors of racial pride, self-acceptance, and self-efficacy beliefs. These research findings reinforce the importance of teachers, who are affirming of African American students’ cultural differences and carry that cultural acceptance into their daily teaching practices. Stanton-Salazar (2001) posits minority youth seek protective barriers within the home and their communities through supportive relationships that help them withstand institutional barriers and develop resilience. They find strength to overcome barriers to institutional resources and academic opportunities through community support networks (e.g., churches, big brother/big sister organizations, afterschool tutoring programs outside of the school).

Mattison (2013) cites faculty support and mentoring as the main strategies for encouraging and supporting academic persistence in African American community college
students. Hausmann, Ye, Ward-Schofield, and Woods (2009) explored White and African American first-year university students’ sense of belonging and its effect on their academic persistence and found that a sense of belonging ranked slightly higher for White students’ academic persistence than for African American students. African American students’ persistence was affected by the following variables in order of rank, GPA, intentions to persist, family and friend’s encouragement, institutional commitment, goal commitment, and sense of belonging. Low-income, African American students who have attained post-secondary educational status have built and utilized social capital to do so. It is also important to note the attainment of post-secondary educational status in low-income, African American students in and of itself denotes the presence of academic optimism.

**Facilitators of Academic Optimism**

Many researchers have identified family support as an important component of students’ academic achievement and well-being (Noguera, 2003; Rothstein, 2004). Hodgkinson (1983) examined the effects of the increase in single-family households and its impact on a student’s decision to attend college. Stage and Hossler (1989) determined, in their study titled *Differences in Family Influences on College Attendance Plans for Male and Female Ninth Graders*, that the strongest influence of college attendance was fathers’ educational level, with the mothers’ education level the second greatest influence on educational plans. The third common predictor was family income. Further research conducted by Hossler and Stage (1992) focused on developing and testing students’ predisposition towards attending college utilizing a structural model. The findings identified parental expectations and encouragement as being an impetus for post-secondary educational pursuits. The researchers state, “parent expectations and encouragement appear to play an important role in the predisposition phrase” (p. 432).
study’s findings indicated parental influence and high school experiences were significantly related to student achievement. One interesting result was the parents of minority students had high educational expectations of their children despite their children having lower GPA’s than the other study participants. Carpenter and Fleishman (1987) posit that parent expectations have a direct and positive effect on student achievement.

Recent studies contradict Hossler and Stage’s (1992) findings by identifying the mother’s educational level as having the greatest influence on a student’s pursuit of post-secondary educational status (Choi, Raley, Muller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2008; Haverman & Wolfe, 1994). According to Magnuson, Sexton, Davis-Kean, and Huston (2009), the higher the level of maternal education, the greater the child’s language acquisition and cognitive development. Harding, Morris, & Hughes (2015) noted mothers who form a positive relationship with their child’s school faculty contribute to their child’s sense of school belonging and academic achievement.

Trusting relationships between students and teachers help to create a safe and nurturing teaching environment. The extra support and intervention from teachers can also propel a student in their academic pursuits. According to Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk -Hoy (2001), “Teachers’ sense of efficacy has been related to student outcomes such as achievement, motivation and students’ own sense of efficacy” (p. 783). Teachers with teacher efficacy try harder to reach students and work harder to help them achieve their academic goals. They are also less critical of their students (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008) posit in their study on “School Belonging” that African American male students who feel a sense of belonging in their school environment have a greater sense of self-efficacy than students without a connection to their school environment.
However, while this research generally speaks about African American male students, it is also relevant to African American female students. According to Klem and Connell (2004), students who experience supportive and caring relationships with teachers, counselors, and school administrators possess a positive academic attitude and have increased school engagement. The researchers examined the link between teacher support, academic engagement, and academic success. The study findings concluded that teacher support was important to students’ and teachers’ academic engagement. Thus, this finding reinforces the importance of teacher student relationships that are trusting and supportive for both the teachers and students, which in turn builds educational and social capital. Finn and Rock (1997) conducted a study of 1,803 minority students to determine if student engagement was an important component of academic resilience. The study’s findings concluded that a positive relationship existed between students’ academic engagement (being prepared for class, good attendance, and participation in extracurricular activities) and academic resilience (students’ ability to forge ahead academically no matter what external and internal obstacles they may face). Students who forge trusting relationships in their school environments are more apt to participate in a school’s academic culture and extracurricular activities.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) propose a new theory of social trust termed *relational trust*. Relational trust, according to the authors “views the social exchanges of schooling as organized around a distinct set of role relationships: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents and with their school principal” (p. 22). Relational trust merges some of the constructs of organic trust (unquestioning beliefs) with the constructs of contractual trust (work exchanges) and applies them to the schooling environment and the day-to-day interactions between students, teachers, and school staff (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Students who experience
trusting relationships with their peers are determined to have higher levels of academic achievement, which may be due to the supportive nature of the interactions (Klem & Connell, 2004).

The Coleman Report (1966) also identified peer support and encouragement as a contributing factor in student academic achievement. This relationship has been found to have an influential effect on student achievement. Similarly, Klem and Connell (2004) point out that care and interpersonal relationships are directly linked to school satisfaction, positive student attitudes and greater academic engagement.

Summary

The literature on students’ academic achievement and factors that contribute is well-established when it pertains to marginalized students, particularly African American male students (Caldwell, Sewell, Parks, & Toldson, 2009; Davis, 2003; Irving & Hudley, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). However, qualitative literature pertaining to low-income, African American female students is minimal. Their educational life histories are important to document in order to illuminate K-12 educational inequality and the ensuing educational impediments to higher education in the educational trajectories of low-income, African American female students.
Chapter 3: Methodology

African American women’s lives matter. There are few research studies conducted to explore their unique life experiences and perspectives as first generation students. One of the main research goals of this qualitative study was to give voice to low-income, African American female students. This qualitative study utilized a life history approach to explore the schooling experiences of low-income, African American female, first-year college students with an emphasis on illuminating their perspectives of their academic lives. Designing a qualitative research study with the explicit goal of highlighting participants’ life stories, which conveys their personal interactions with others and their interpretation of these human encounters, is an outcome of the narrative inquiry process (Polkinghorne, 1995).

According to Hatch (2002), “The lived experiences of real people in real settings are the object of [qualitative] study” (p. 6). Qualitative research methods require the use of “thick description” to describe, document, and portray all of the nuances of the participant’s life situation in detailed and contextual form (Geertz, 1973, p.3). Examining the details of participants’ lived experiences is important and helps to illuminate a more detailed picture of lived experience. The researcher is the “research instrument,” and this shapes the design of the research study. The qualitative researcher’s focus is on exploring how people make meaning of their lived experiences (Seidman, 2006). Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (1990, p. 427) posit qualitative researchers are occupied with the “process as well as the product,” meaning how people arrive at certain attitudes and beliefs, their human interactions, and the meanings they ascribe to these interactions.

I have employed the narrative inquiry process in my research design to emphasize low-income, African American female participants’ life stories, in a sincere attempt to identify
significant events and relationships in their life histories and any facilitators or obstacles they have encountered in their pursuit of post-secondary educational opportunities. The life stories of the study’s participants have been documented and analyzed to identify common elements or themes that have emerged from the narrative data.

The focus on low-income, African American female students was intentional due to the paucity of research that offers the opportunity for their life realities to be explored and documented. There has been much research on African American male students and the many obstacles and impediments to their academic success, and it is vital and necessary research. However, African American female students face numerous obstacles on their journey to obtain post-secondary educational status. The purpose of this research study was to give low-income, African American female students voice and the opportunity to share their life histories and their perceptions of the significant events that have shaped their academic lives.

It is important, according to Geertz (1973, p. 3), to use “thick description” to describe, document, and portray all of the nuances of the participant’s life situation in detailed and actualized form. Documenting a person’s lived experiences entails learning about her life history, educational experiences, and personal beliefs. Conducting life history interviews helps to assist participants to engage in self-reflection and provides the opportunity for insight into their own lives through the identification and analysis of significant life events and experiences within a social context; and this is an important qualitative process that the researcher needs to facilitate (Seidman, 2006). Hatch (2002) points out that the various terms ascribed to narratives in qualitative research, “life story research, biographies, personal experience methods, oral history, and narrative inquiry” (p. 28) may differ in approach and emphasis, but all focus on gathering and interpreting the stories people create to describe their lives. No matter what the label, human
beings yearn to make sense of their lives through documentation of their own personal stories (Hatch, 2002).

The history of racial, social, economic, political, and educational inequality that many African Americans have experienced in America has been documented, but rarely are young, African American women’s voices heard in the inequality discourse. The opportunity to give voice to low-income, young African American female college students who have been subjected to racial, political, social, economic, gender, and educational contempt, to the degree that African American girls and women have experienced and continue to experience in U.S. society, appeared essential to explore in this study.

The opportunity to situate participants’ life histories into a social context utilizing life histories methodology helps to distinguish low-income, African American female college students and their stories from the compilation of inequality accounts and provides a chance to document their unique experiences and struggles. Some researchers argue that African American girls and women are negatively perceived in U.S. society and globally, and their true identity needs to be revealed or told (Carroll, 1997; Pellerin, 2011). The call to accurately document and describe the lives of low-income, African American female college students is sounded by Smith (1983) who asks for “Inquiries filled with the presence and spoken experiences of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds” (p. 107). African American women’s cultural and educational values are diverse and solicit exploration.

**Life Histories**

Life histories provide a unique perspective on the participants’ views of their reality. Glesne (2011) attests utilizing life history methods as the representation of the participants’ stories is often a more holistic approach and embodies more meaning than just ethnographic
reports. Life histories connect the personal with the social (Schwandt, 2007). McCall (1985) describes life history research as “specific acts, events, relationships, and circumstances in particular lives” (p. 170).

The origins of life history research are grounded in anthropology (Germeten, 2013). Anthropologists have been investigating people and their unique cultures for centuries. The importance of accurately interpreting the lives of people and how they interact in their social environment can reveal significant insight into how societies function. Coles and Knowles (2001) posit four principles to guide life history research: relationality—the relationship between the researcher and the study participants, mutuality—a collaboration between the researcher and study participation to participate in impartial and accurate research efforts, empathy—the ability of the researcher to accurately gauge the emotional temperature of the participants through reflexivity, and care—the capacity to demonstrate sensitivity and respect for one’s participants and the telling of their stories.

Life history research comprises a series of interviews that are conducted to construct the life story of the participant and situate it in a social, political, racial, economic, and cultural context depending on the research aim (Glesne, 2011). Life History research is a collective of relationships. Coles and Knowles (2001) describe key relationships of significance involving Life History research:

- the researcher’s relationship to the topic,
- the participants’ representation in the research,
- the relationship between the reader and research data,
- the positioning of the research topic in the field of relevant literature, and
- the positioning of the participants’ lives in a meaningful context (pp. 9–10).
According to Glesne (2011), a good life history draws the reader into the participant’s world and causes them to reflect on their own lives through introspection and questions the story illuminates. An excellent example of this is Henry’s (1995) life history titled *Growing Up Black, Female, and Working Class: A Teacher’s Narrative*, which details the life history of Ese, an African-Caribbean Canadian teacher, who grew up in Leeds, England, in the 1960s. The life history situates her experience in the context of race and gender identity; she was the only Black student in her elementary school and endured repeated racial insults and slander without any recourse or teacher support. Her experiences as a child in an all-White educational environment inform her current social and cultural activism as an educator in a predominately African Canadian, low-income neighborhood in southern Ontario, Canada.

After learning about the injustices she experienced through her K-12 education, one can relate to her strong desire to make sure her African Canadian students felt connected to their heritage and were aware of the cultural contributions of Africans throughout North America and the world. Henry (1995) interrelates Ese’s narrative with the social and political climate of Britain in the 1960s and 1970s and the educational inequalities that Afro-Caribbeans experienced in schools. Henry (1995) succinctly utilized life history methodology to demonstrate the intersection of race, class, and gender and its effects on Ese’s life choices. Her exploration of the meaning of Black identity in a hostile, racially charged environment gives the reader pause in an effort to fully contemplate the otherness that Ese must have experienced. Through a carefully edited narrative text, Henry allows the reader to feel Ese’s loneliness and isolation, which transports us briefly into her world.

According to Stake (1995), the importance of preserving the participants’ multiple realities is paramount to accurately interpreting life histories and creating meaningful and
accurate case histories. The importance of accurately depicting the participants’ life histories takes on even more significance when my positionality as the study’s researcher is taken into account.

**Positionality and Critical Reflexivity**

Moore (2012) described insiders as individuals who have an inside position in the group being investigated since they share all or one or more of the same factors, such as a similar background, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, education, etc., and outsiders are not members of the group. A qualitative Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS) conducted by the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town collected qualitative data by observing participants in their neighborhoods, social and family settings, and in their respective schools. The researchers, aware of their positionality of being “others” strategically trained four South African students as ethnographic researchers to assist with interviewing some of their peers. The researchers, aware of their positionality outside of the participants’ community, took action to minimize the impact on their ethnographic fieldwork (Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses, & Seeings, 2010).

My positionality in regards to my qualitative research study was unique in the sense that I have navigated the same educational terrain of the study participants, as a low-income, first-year African American female college student. I matriculated through a public K-12 school and received my high school diploma after overcoming many personal and educational hurdles. My ability to relate and understand the challenges these young women experienced was a positive attribute as an African American woman; however, as a qualitative researcher, it triggered old wounds and sometimes interfered with my capacity to maintain critical boundaries and distance. My insider positionality did, however, assist me with connecting with the study’s participants.
though I did not assume it would, and from the onset of the research study, I was cautiously guarding and disciplining my subjectivity as a researcher (Peshkin, 1988). Hollway (2009) discusses the importance of the researcher learning how to balance the “experience-near” narratives. Whether through verbal or nonverbal cues, researchers have the capacity to connect through feelings and words by evoking compassion regarding life experiences. Why was I tearing up when a participant spoke about her mother calling her names? I realized that I had to immediately examine these feelings as they occurred in order to be able to assess their emotional impact on me as the researcher and any feelings they may have elicited regarding my analysis of the participants’ life histories. With the reflective element of elapsed time and adult maturity, I have been able to examine the societal factors and structural inequalities that influenced my educational journey and kept these reflections foremost when interviewing the young women and analyzing their narratives.

Essential to critically analyzing one’s narrative data is the qualitative researcher’s understanding of how positionality may shift throughout the research process. Although, I started with an insider positionality status, my current status as an older African American professional woman and the years that distance the research participants from me as well as our mutual experiences also affected my positionality and, in effect, shifted my positionality to an outsider at times throughout the research process. Although there were similar experiences, the research participants were describing their own unique educational experiences and the young women were reflecting on the life challenges that were shaping their understanding of themselves and their academic goals. I, in turn, have been emotionally and physically removed from that process for quite some time, so the distancing was present and helped to create a boundary between their educational and life experiences and my previous lived educational and life experiences, which is
an important distinction and critical to achieving and maintaining disciplined subjectivity throughout the qualitative research process (Watt, 2007).

Johnson-Bailey, an African American researcher interviewing African American women, discovered there was a shared bond with her participants, but there was a distinct division when it came to social class and colorism (intra-racial discrimination; Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Ntseane, & Mohamad, 2001). Brown (2012) embraced her insider positionality. In her research she argues from a feminist standpoint theorizing that marginalized groups because of their shared experiences are in a better position to ask questions from within their own group because of their insider status. However, non-marginalized groups are not privy to this insider view and lack the clarity and insight to effectively question. Rivera (2008), in her study, possessed insider positionality as a former child recipient of welfare benefits and bore witness to her sister’s struggle with homelessness and low educational attainment, yet she utilized her insider status as an impetus for her study while demonstrating critical reflexivity and maintaining insider/outsider boundaries as she developed a critical social analysis of the narratives. Similar to the work of Rivera (2008), my interest in exploring the facilitators and barriers that contribute to low-income, first-year, African American female college students’ efforts to pursue a post-secondary education at a four-year college motivated my research efforts since I have navigated the same academic terrain as a low-income, African American female college student.

Brown (2012) stated, “Black feminist academics are positioned to use their social location to distinctively analyze race, class, and gender in various social settings” (p. 20). My goal was to embrace my insider positionality to elicit details and events that my research participants might not otherwise offer with an “outsider.” The decision to use my insider positionality encompassed the obligation to be constantly self-reflective and acknowledge the
effect my insider status has on my study, its participants, and the data collection methods. I have employed constant self-monitoring to ensure my feelings, perceptions, and values have not dictated my research direction or interfered with the analysis of the data. I have utilized critical reflective journals throughout the process to examine any lingering feelings or nuances that needed to be examined and comprehended (Glesne, 2011).

The importance of taking this holistic approach has taken on additional significance. Insider status can cause the researcher to see part of the picture and obscure the rest due to the researcher’s own biases, experiences, perceptions, and values. It is important to have an emic and analytic perspective. An emic or meaning-oriented perspective enables the researcher to describe and interpret accurately what is seen and heard (Seidman, 2006). Coles and Knowles (2001) argue “to understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusion within the life of just one member of the community is to gain insights into the collective” (p. 11).

The positionality of the qualitative researcher as an “insider” or “outsider” necessitates examination and should be resolved before collection of data begins. The qualitative researcher’s positionality should be contemplated and interpreted in preparation for collecting and analyzing data. Brown (2012) and Rivera (2008) both possessed “insider” status. Brown embraced her “insider” status and utilized it as part of her qualitative research methodology. Rivera (2008) examined it and realized it was the impetus for her research aim and focus. Both researchers resolved their positionality issues before beginning their qualitative data collection and analysis. I followed their lead and made sure my positionality was addressed and examined through the use of self-reflective practices that were built into this qualitative research study’s design. I completed my own life history and identified “warm and cool spots” in advance of the
interviewing process to neutralize any emotional and psychological residue of my own lived experiences (Peshkin, 1988).

Maxwell (2005) points out, “Traditionally, what you bring to the research from your own background and identity has been treated as ‘bias,’ something whose influence needs to be eliminated from the design, rather than a valuable component of it” (p. 37). All qualitative researchers bring values and biases into their research, as instruments of research themselves; identifying and examining their values and biases before interpretation of the data creates the necessary distance required from a qualitative researcher (Hollway, 2009; Watt, 2007). The data source and how it is collected impacts its meaning and how the data are analyzed (Thomas, 1993). It is the job of the qualitative researcher not to impose her own personal understanding on her research. Qualitative researchers are interpreters of interpretations, meaning their interpretations of participants’ life stories are grounded in the participants’ meanings embedded in their lives. The task is to be “present” without becoming a part of the story.

**Disciplined Subjectivity**

The motivation to explore the lived experiences of low-income, African American female college students is one that is personally moving and important to me. As an African American female, I, too, have experienced hurdles and challenges navigating the world of higher education. My lived experiences have drawn me to research the factors that contribute to African American female academic success despite navigating numerous personal, family, and structural obstacles including racial discrimination and economic inequality. The opportunity to discuss the barriers and obstacles I encountered as I pursued my post-secondary educational opportunities was never available to me. The undertaking of a specific respite to reflect on the facilitators and barriers would have been a perfect juncture on my relentless post-secondary educational journey.
I am aware of my obligation as a qualitative researcher to maintain a degree of personal and professional distance from my research and my research participants, and occasionally I stepped on that fine line between being and becoming; however, my awareness of this research partition was constantly honored and observed and was never crossed. Peshkin (1988) urges qualitative researchers to intentionally search for “warm and cool spots” (p. 18) throughout the data gathering process and to analysis these feelings and their origins as they occur, rather than waiting until the writing process to become aware of them and analyze their subsequent meanings.

Delving into the personal lives of my study’s participants created a bond between us and sometimes evoked feelings of protectiveness that I needed to recognize and position as we engaged in the interview process. The urge to give advice was strong and needed to be muted in order to ensure unfettered collection of the data. There is vulnerability present in Life History research that needs to be cherished and protected. It was an important task that needed to be realized in my research study, and it was accomplished.

**Study Population and Selection Criteria**

The study population comprised 16 low-income first-year African American female students enrolled in post-secondary education in southeast Michigan. There were two criteria that were essential in selecting participants: first-year student status and low-income. The criterion of first-year post-secondary status was determined to be 30 college credits or fewer. This decision was based on the reasoning that the research participants would still have the ability to recall with fresh details the events that transpired as they pursued their post-secondary educational aspirations and would be in a better position to reflect on certain facilitators and barriers they encountered throughout their educational journey. For the purposes of this research study, low-
income was self-reported and identified through receipt of Pell Grant awards and/or free or reduced lunch status as a high school student. Students were selected from community colleges and four-year universities in southeast Michigan.

Data Gathering and Instrumentation

An important component of thick description in qualitative research is to describe the moment, setting, participant, and event as vividly as possible. It is important, according to Geertz (1973), to use “thick description” to describe, document, and portray all of the nuances of the participant’s life situation in detailed and vivid form. The importance of documenting the elements of the setting, the participants’ gestures, expressions, and my own thoughts and impressions takes on a more significant meaning when utilizing life history methodology.

Documenting a person’s lived experiences entails learning about their life histories and educational experiences and the personal beliefs that they hold. The researcher, in a sense, becomes the research instrument. The ability to assist the research study’s participants with self-reflection and the opportunity for insight into their own life through the use of life history interviews (Seidman, 2006) in a social context is an important skill the qualitative researcher needs to utilize. Coles and Knowles (2001) maintain, “Lives are never lived in complete isolation from social context…to be a human being is to have connections with others and the collective societal influences and institutions, be they historical, political, economic, educational, religious, or even environmental,” (p. 22). My awareness as a researcher of the participants’ significant relationships was essential to capturing a complete rendering of their schooling experiences.

I maintained a research journal to capture each interview, the participant, the setting and events that transpired. Field notes served a dual purpose in my research design. One set was taken to document participants’ responses and nonverbal cues during the interview process.
Observations that are recorded in field notes can later be utilized to provide important contextual information helpful when deciphering the participant’s narrative (Maxwell, 2005). A second set of field notes was taken to document events for daily critical reflection and identification of any assumptions or judgmental observations. The importance of situating one’s own thoughts and beliefs is crucial to approaching the interview process with open-mindedness and awareness.

Interviews were audio taped with each research participant’s informed consent. The field notes composed from the participants’ interviews was a way to “ground” the information into a systematic format for interpretation. An important goal of “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, p. 3) to write field notes that accurately describe the setting, the participant, and include as many details as possible, so that the information gathered is captured in such a way that at any point in the future, I am able to relive that day and all of its nuances through reviewing my field notes (Glesne, 2011).

Each of the study participants was interviewed twice. Each of the in-depth interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The initial interviews were semi-structured and focused on general knowledge of their schooling experiences and family life. Seidman (2006) states the first interview establishes the context of the participant’s experience. Participants need to have ample time to reconstruct their educational lives from as far back as they can recall to the present. The focus was on past experiences that helped them to attain post-secondary academic status. Seidman (2006) stresses the importance of adhering to the three-interview series structural integrity. This adherence reflects the importance of giving the participant interview space to tell their life story (first interview), to explore its meaning in relation to the lives that intertwine with it (second interview), and to analyze its meaning in the totality of their lived experiences (third interview) allowing for in-depth reflection and the placement of their life stories in a specific
context. This study’s interview procedure was based on a modified use of Seidman’s three-step interview process covering meaning and life world analysis in the second comprehensive follow-up interviews. The follow-up interviews were open-ended allowing the participants to explore their life histories and make meaning of the events as they reflected on the previous interview and expounded on events they felt were significant to their post-secondary educational status. Seidman (2006) posits “People’s behavior becomes meaningful when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (pp. 16–17).

Seidman (2006) discusses the metamorphosis of relationships people create and experience in the effort to gain a fuller understanding of one another. The “I-Thou” relationship is created by the recognition of these relationships and that the “Thou is someone close to the interviewer, still separate, but a fellow person [and when]...the sense of ‘Thou-ness’ becomes mutual [it] becomes a ‘we relationship’” (p. 96). The difficulty for the researcher lies in finding the right distance between the two relationships (Hall, 2014). This distance is important, because it assisted me as a qualitative researcher in determining when and what research interview questions to propose and which were painful and caused distress for the participants. Seidman (2006) insists that the private lives of the participants are sacred and should be handled with care by the researcher. As a researcher, navigating that emotional territory with them required my utmost respect and privacy. Following Seidman’s advice, “May I ask,” led most of my research questions that deal with issues of otherness, racial, class, and gender discrimination. The awareness of the potential to revisit hurtful and negative experiences and their potential effects on the research participants was at the forefront of my thoughts and actions.

All participant interviews were conducted in college libraries, public libraries, or other public places in southeastern Michigan that allowed privacy to help promote a sense of security,
allowing the study’s participants to gain the feeling of security and safety in order to share the intimate details of their life stories. The interview timeline was from December 2014 to July 2015. A total of 30 interviews were conducted consisting of 16 initial interviews and 14 follow-up interviews. Sixteen research participants were initially selected to participate in this qualitative research study with nine participants’ life histories highlighted and explored (see Appendix A and B).

Purposive sampling and snowballing methods (Schram, 2003: Seidman, 2006) were utilized to ensure all participant criteria were met. The participants were recruited utilizing various methods. After receiving IRB approval from Eastern Michigan University’s Human Subjects Review Committee to conduct my research study, I posted flyers in various communities and university campuses in southeastern Michigan. The main recruiting method was snowballing. Because of the personal nature of one of the participant criteria (e.g., low-income), after locating a research participant, I requested assistance from them in seeking other research study participants that met the study’s first-year status and low-income requirement. Also, I contacted minority-based programs within selected colleges and universities that assisted low-income students by providing programs to assist their matriculation through post-secondary education. After making contact with the program directors and disclosing the details related to the research study’s aims, the program directors disseminated the flyer (see Appendix C) to their student base with my contact information, and potential participants contacted me through email and phone calls to express their interest in participating in the research study. Also, recruiting efforts were made through networking with other educators, professional contacts, and Greek organizations.
Analysis of Interview Data

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Microsoft Word files were created for each of the study’s participants containing raw interview notes, transcribed interviews, and field notes. Research data were sorted into analytic files to begin the preliminary process of coding. Each participant was renamed with a pseudonym and her files were password protected ensuring confidentiality throughout the research process. I was the only person with access to these files, and they were stored on my personal desktop computer and backed up on a flash drive device. After completion of the dissertation, all files will be destroyed.

The search for patterns or themes within the research data was conducted through comprehensive, careful, detailed reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts and identification of key patterns. Once key patterns were identified, the data were categorized or coded. Glesne (2011) describes the process as “a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data that are applicable to your research purpose” (p. 154). The interviews of each participant were compared and analyzed to confirm and clarify participants’ meanings and detect common themes and patterns that were present in the research data. After the interviews were coded, the identification of common themes was noted. At that point, it was determined that academic optimism was identified to be present in the schooling experiences of the low-income, African American female colleges students who participated in this research study. Other findings from the study included the role of community colleges in creating a bridge to four-year universities for many African American female college students. Other key themes identified from an analysis of the data included the effects of parental absence on academic achievement, participation in extracurricular activities and supportive relationships
with caring adults, African American females and their struggles with math achievement as well as resilience and persistence.

**Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent**

The opportunity this research project presents to give voice to low-income, first-year, African American female college students is a rare and unique one. As a researcher, I must ensure that that is exactly what occurred; that their voices are heard. The research data embodied their voices. Searching to identify and describe relationships is a constant endeavor and one that requires introspection, critical subjectivity, and self-reflection. As Seidman (2006) states, “Informed consent is the first step towards minimizing the risks participants face when they agree to be interviewed” (p. 61). One of my main concerns as a researcher conducting this research was that my research participants felt safe and trusted that I would protect their rights and respect their privacy. And so, after creating an informed consent form, I gave it to the study’s participants and explained its contents, which include the participant’s role in the research, the research objectives, how data will be collected, analyzed, and safeguarded, and the rights of the participant, including the right to voluntary participation, to withdraw at any time, the right to privacy and to discuss any concerns at the initial meeting and before interviews were conducted. A copy of their signed informed consent form was also given to each of the study’s participants (see Appendix E).

The utilization of the qualitative method of life histories to explore the lived experiences of the study’s participants engaged me as a researcher on a compelling journey as these young women shared their life stories with an openness and honesty that was both enthralling and timely.
Chapter 4: Before the Promised Land: Community College

Community colleges play a vital role in closing the educational and financial gap that exists between high schools and four-year universities. Community colleges can provide a quiet, safe and nurturing environment for post-secondary students who are not quite ready to meet the challenges and the academic and social fast pace of a four-year university. Community colleges provide an alternative academic route that is less expensive and less academically demanding than a four-year university, allowing students to navigate their post-secondary educational journey at their own pace and at their current academic level. Each of the five participants whose educational journeys are depicted in this chapter chose community college as their educational path for a variety of reasons. Eva left with little recourse but to enroll in a community college after entrance into one four-year college after another was blocked. Carla needed to prove to herself and her family that she was capable and willing to complete her course requirements for obtaining her Bachelor’s degree. She enrolled in community college as a second and final chance. Halle was grateful for her educational reprieve, having been dismissed from a four-year university and found the challenges of attending a four-year university somewhat overwhelming. She found academic solace in her small and nurturing community college that she now attends. Pam, with limited economic resources, is currently using community college as a vehicle to progress to a four-year university. Nikki knows that her only hope of getting into the Physical Therapy Program at Wayne State University is to attend a community college and increase her grade point average (GPA); only by taking the liberal arts courses they offer and obtaining high grades will she be able to achieve her academic goals.
The study participants in this chapter all attended community college. Their ultimate goal was to attend a four-year university and obtain a college degree; yet they have encountered financial, academic, family related issues that have delayed their educational journeys. Despite encountering enormous obstacles, as well as academic failure, these students have demonstrated determination, persistence, and resilience in achieving their educational aspirations. Their life stories reveal personal struggles as well as strategic agency and self-efficacy.

**Eva: A Dream Deferred**

**Family profile.** Eva is a 19-year-old, African American female college student working a full-time job while attending community college in southeastern Michigan. She is the only child of her mother and father. Her mother rarely showed interest in Eva’s academic life and seldom attended programs at Eva’s elementary school. Eva’s visits with her grandmother grew longer and longer, until Eva realized staying with her grandmother would be her best option. Eva has been living with her maternal grandmother and step grandfather since third grade in a suburb of metropolitan Detroit. Her mother’s interaction began to slowly fade from Eva’s daily life and her visits were limited to family gatherings and holidays. Eva attended elementary and secondary school in her grandmother’s suburban school district. As Eva began to excel at school, she built meaningful and supportive relationships with her teachers and school counselors. Fun loving with a great sense of humor, Eva knows when to have fun and when it is time to get down to business. She has worked hard to become a college student.

Eva says her senior year of high school brought all of her family issues to the forefront. She continues,

It’s been years and years of family fights over me, over what my grandma do, but I lived with my grandma since I was younger, so my grandma looks at it as I’m her child…Like,
she pays for everything, she don’t ask my momma for money and my momma never offered to give her money.

That is why listening to her mom’s constant arguments with her grandmother regarding her senior year activities and who would pay for what caused a huge disagreement in their family eventually forced Eva to choose sides. Eva recalls, “My grandma and my auntie was telling my mom, you don’t do anything, you know like you don’t contribute to anything … you created a child and not putting forth the effort.” After siding with her grandmother and her aunt, Eva’s mother severed ties with the family and with Eva. Eva has come to the realization that mother and daughter relationships can be difficult. However this does little to dull the pain her mother’s abandonment has created:

Do you sleep okay at night? When you know that you left me somewhere…I love my momma. I’m always gonna love my momma because that’s my momma, but I don’t like her. She didn’t even show up for my graduation.

The smile dissipates from Eva’s face and a pained expression starts in her eyes and spreads slowly across her face as she discloses her true feelings regarding her mother’s absence from her high school graduation and her response to it “I mean it would have been great to see your face [her mother’s] out there while I’m walking across the stage, but my grandma, my auntie and my little cousins are enough for me to get by.” Not only was Eva’s mom absent from her graduation, Eva has not seen her mother or talked to her since the family fight right before graduation over a year ago. Her voice begins to rise as she recalls her mom’s absence from all of her senior year events:

I thought it was selfish, but I got through it like at that point [graduation] I was like pissed off like, how can you just not be around for this but at the same time…it’s not like
I didn’t graduate… at the end of the day it was all me anyway! So, I didn’t really need you to do nothing in the first place… I think I would feel abandoned if I couldn’t accomplish anything. I would feel like, you’re the reason why I’m like this. But, honestly … I don’t feel like I missed anything.

What Eva really needs her mother to do, she seems to be unwilling to do, and that is be there for her on a daily basis by helping her through life’s challenges and being present to cheer her accomplishments. Contemplating her mom’s involvement in her school life Eva recalls:

I used to have like band concerts and award ceremonies. She would come to some of that stuff. That was just for show to like show the school that she was still present a little bit, but it wasn’t genuine.

Eva’s mom never showed any real interest in her schoolwork; Eva says she never even attended a parent-teacher conference. When parent-teacher conferences came around Eva remembers thinking, “My momma not gonna go, so I programmed it in my head like not even to think about it. So, like I would never even ask, ‘Oh are you coming?’” to her mom because the answer was always “No.”

**Academic support.** Eva’s mother may not have shown any interest in her academic life, but Eva had teachers that motivated her to do well in school. Her second grade teacher, Mrs. Karr (who was also her mother’s third grade teacher) was “really enthusiastic and really encouraging.” She just remembers how uplifting Mrs. Karr was and how she always told her and her classmates even at their young ages “college is important, high school is going to be important.” She would talk to Eva and her class about some of her previous students, their accomplishments, and the pitfalls they encountered. She would talk with them about “what they needed to prepare for [in high school]” during sharing hour. At the time Eva was thinking, “high
school I’m trying to make it to middle school.” Now she can see the wisdom in her teacher’s actions as she was planting seeds of knowledge for the next generation to harvest. Eva is appreciative of Mrs. Karr’s forward thinking and acknowledges, “That was really smart like preparing me for the world.” Although Mrs. Karr gave advice about attending college, she never said what to do if you make it into your two dream colleges but cannot afford to attend either one of them.

**College aspirations.** Eva had originally applied and was accepted into her dream four-year university: Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. However, Eva’s grandmother announced upon Eva’s receipt of her Spelman College acceptance letter, “I don’t know how you going to get there [to Spelman]. That’s just not gonna work.” The gratitude Eva holds for her grandmother for taking her into her home and raising her prevented her from opposing her grandmother’s objections. And so with her grandmother’s autocratic decision, Eva’s dream of attending Spelman University was deferred. Heartbroken but determined to attend a four-year university, she turned to her second college choice, Bowling Green University in Ohio.

Finances were a major factor in Eva’s decision to attend Bowling Green University. Eva’s grandmother is retired and living on a fixed income. Eva was concerned that her grandmother would not be willing to provide transportation to Bowling Green University however, to Eva’s relief her grandparents were willing to drive her there to register her for admission. It seemed like Eva’s dream of becoming a university student was finally coming into fruition:

So, we get down there [Bowling Green University] and I’m about to take my picture and the financial people, like the financial counselors, they tell me that I’m twelve thousand a year short. No, I’m sorry a semester, twelve thousand a semester short. Remind you, I
had scholarships, grants. I only got like 15 hundred dollars’ worth of Pell grants. So, I’m just like “this is not happening, this cannot be happening right now.”

Sensing that her second chance to attend a four-year university was slipping away she immediately went into crisis mode and asked if there is any way to solve her financial problem. The financial aid counselors, her grandparents, and Eva tried to figure out a solution to her financial dilemma. Eva realized that without her grandmother’s tax information she was not going to be able to resolve her financial aid issue, and she begged her grandmother to fill out the parent section of the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) to secure additional financial assistance. Her grandmother’s reply was swift and unrelenting:

I’m not giving you my W2’s. I’m just not doing that. I can’t give you my tax information like I can’t do it. I’m just not doing that…I don’t know how you going to do it because I don’t have any money.

After realizing she would not be attending Bowling Green University Eva became extremely despondent. Not only was it difficult dealing with her own disappointment, as she attests, “I worked too hard in high school like staying in school till eight, nine o’clock at night. I worked too hard in high school to just be sitting here.” She even took advantage of her school’s early college attendance program, taking college courses at their partner community college.

Her disappointment at not being able to attend Bowling Green was elevated after witnessing the reaction of so many of her teachers and her high school counselor when she told them that she would not be able to attend a four-year university. Eva recalls telling her high school counselor “I could just remember the look on her face, like we did all that work for nothing.” Her teachers and counselors spent so much time and energy helping her apply to colleges and complete college applications and now Eva admits that the reality of the situation
was “It hurt me more to know I did not fulfill what we talked about all year.” She believes she let each and every one of them down.

A week after the Bowling Green University financial aid fiasco, Eva was still contemplating her educational options:

I was sitting in the [school] office and I’m just sitting there like what am I gonna do...everybody I know in administration, all of the counselors and everything, they in there brainstorming, like what are we gonna do? And, at my high school, I went to Maple Woods High School. I was really known for being like… constantly on the news. Constantly in newspapers for like for Maple Woods and stuff like that…you’re going to go off to a big university. That’s what was expected of me. I had a 3.5 grade point average. I was involved with various activities across like across campus. I was just really involved in school…that’s probably why my ambition is so big. Because, I’m just like, I know I’m capable of going out there and getting what I want and like making things happen for myself. But, it’s hard when you stuck at home with grandma. It’s hard!

The remedy to Eva’s problems was simple, they all concluded, she could just attend Wayne State University (WSU). Eva was relieved when they all agreed attending WSU was the best option for her, and she was confident her grandmother would agree it was right in the city and she had already been accepted into the university. Surely Eva’s grandmother would see WSU is the perfect option as well, but she did not “Grandma didn’t want me going to Wayne State.” Eva speculated her grandmother sees her as her baby; her last child and she wanted to keep her in close proximity. Eva’s disappointment was palpable as she realized all of her college dreams were shriveled by her grandmother’s unrelenting and controlling nature. Although Eva was irritated by her grandmother’s controlling nature, she was also very protective of her. This
emotional dichotomy allows Eva to despise her grandmother’s controlling ways, yet possess feelings of gratitude for her taking Eva into her home and providing for her, “I do owe her something.”

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** Eva was devastated when her hopes and dreams of attending the three universities she worked so hard to get into were slipping away. Eva could not file as an independent student; she did not meet the requirements for being an independent student having never been formally adopted by her grandmother, nor has her grandmother ever tried to obtain legal guardianship over her. She needed her mother’s financial information to file her FAFSA and obtain the greatest amount of financial assistance possible, which Eva was certain her mother would not provide. Also, in order to file as a dependent student she needed the parent information completed, and her grandmother refused to provide the income tax documentation. Eva, comparing the student aid filing requirements with her current filing status, explains that if “both of your parents is deceased and only one of my parents is deceased and they said I had to be like over 30 and have kids.” And so, because Eva’s mother is alive, but not in her life, she needed her grandmother’s income tax documentation to complete the parent section of the FAFSA. Eva was caught in the middle of a financial abyss. Eva, bewildered by the FAFSA filing requirements asks, “Am I in a different world, does my case not apply?” Finding it difficult to prove her financial aid status and frustrated, she insists:

I don’t have contact with my mother. I know it’s people that try to cheat the system, but it’s just like, tsk, do you want to come home with me because I can show you this is real,

\[1\] The actual age is 24-years-old to file as an independent student.
like this is not, I’m not playing. I’m really trying to go to school, and I just think it’s bold how they try to make people jump through hoops just to get an education.

Eva’s frustration with the financial Catch 22 she found herself in is understandable, especially since she discovered right after her father’s death that her mother had been receiving child support payments from her father with Eva being his only child. Eva was stunned with disbelief at her mother’s betrayal:

So like, he was paying child support like all the years I was living with my grandma, he was paying child support and my momma took that money. So, when he passed away, I had already turned, like I was, when he passed away, my momma was still collecting that money. And when I turned eighteen, they told me I wasn’t eligible anymore because now the state cuts you off, once you’re eighteen if your parent has passed away. My momma got that money. So, I never seen that money!

To add insult to injury, Eva’s mom never provided any financial assistance to Eva’s grandmother for Eva’s provisions and care. Eva has temporarily given up her dream of attending a four-year university and is currently enrolled in a community college not far from the home she shares with her grandparents. However, Eva is determined to make it to a four-year university. She recently completed her first year of college at the community college she attends. She will stay at the community college for another year and then transfer to a four-year university. Following that plan allows her to receive state financial assistance since she is technically a “foster child” and is eligible for the state of Michigan’s Tuition Incentive Program (TIP) that provides tuition assistance to students that meet their program requirements. She says she always held the belief “school is important,” and her drive to succeed academically stems from the necessity to improve her environment “I’m looking around me and saying I don’t want this. Like,
I want more than this. I know I’m capable of more than this.” Eva says her biggest fear is “living paycheck to paycheck.” Seeing her family live this way for years weighs heavily on her mind and is the impetus that drives her pursuit of a four-year college degree in spite of the many obstacles she has encountered. Eva is determined to obtain her college degree from a four-year university and reasons:

A lot of African American women are not educated, and I just, I can’t, I don’t want to be a statistic. Like, I don’t want to be like 50, 60 years old, Oh, what could my life had been if I would’ve just went to school, or what could my life have been if I would have put more effort in this, so school at this point is really important to me.

Eva also belongs to a mentoring program and has two “big sisters” that inspire her to never give up “seeing them like strive and just make power moves to be successful just give me hope.” She is emboldened and inspired by their actions, which motivates her to create reaffirming statements such as, “you can do this on your own...just one step at a time. You got this far, you’ll get farther.” Eva has learned a lot this year facing her difficulties and finding ways around them and is confident she will achieve her goal of attending a four-year university.

Carla: A Squandered Opportunity

**Family profile.** Carla is a 20-year-old community college student. She is the youngest member of her family and works full-time. Her siblings are older and were basically out of the house by the time she was growing up and attending public elementary school in the city of Detroit. She recalled briefly living with both parents during middle school and the ensuing pain and disappointment of her father’s abandonment due to his continued drug use.

Carla’s siblings would have appreciated the support and attention Carla received from their mother after she finally beat her drug addiction because they never experienced it. Two of
Carla’s three older siblings have done quite well for themselves despite the fact that when they were growing up, their mom was addicted to crack cocaine. The three older siblings were all grown by the time Carla’s mom became pregnant with Carla at the age of forty-two. Carla’s mom and dad were married and both battling a crack addiction. Carla’s father was constantly in and out of the home due to his many stints in prison. Carla has a different father from her other siblings. Carla’s two brothers and sister are in their early forties “my brothers and sisters don’t have the same exact relationship with her [their mom] as I do because like they grew up with her and she had them at a young age.” Feeling both happy and sad that her mom decided to use raising her as the incentive to finally deal with her substance abuse problem, Carla explains:

I’m happy [about her mother getting help with her substance abuse problem]. [However], some mothers don’t care about their kids, so they keep doing whatever they got to do, you know, doing whatever they’re doing, even though they got kids. So that just shows the person that she is whatever, that she didn’t just have me just to have me. She had me for a reason and she was actually a mother…but, I don’t know, it’s just sad thinking about it like dang, all that for me? That’s sad.

Carla does not remember much about that time in her life or her mother’s drug abuse. Her older sister actually took her in and saved her from going into the foster care system. When she was around eight years old her mom went away for long-term drug abuse treatment:

So yeah, she [her sister] took care of me for the time that my mom was getting herself together, and once my mom did, then I moved back in with her and this was all probably like within like a two or three years.

Although her mom was in the treatment program, she would occasionally get out and visit her school to check on her academic progress. Although her mom did make these infrequent
visits, “my sister was the one who was everywhere because she had a son as well and we were the same age and we went to the same school [and] were in the same grade.” Carla and her sister clashed a lot “I thought I knew everything and she thought she knew everything…but now that I’m older and I’m kinda an adult now we actually get along really well because we can relate on a level.”

Learning to relate to her sister was easy compared to her father; she is still struggling to relate to her father:

I actually just got a relationship with my dad…Okay, during high school I didn’t talk to my father. Probably the last time I seen him from was when I was in middle school. He stayed with us, but he ended up leaving because you know he was on that stuff and he just couldn’t sit still and so he moved to California when I went to high school…His sister stays there. He just moved there I guess to get away I don’t know. But, I hadn’t talked to him for a long time and he went to prison on Christmas of 2012. And he just got released like the end of or January.

Now, Carla and her dad text daily, and he says when he gets off parole he wants to come see her and Carla mused, “I don’t know about all that, but you know I don’t mind talking to him because he is my dad.”

**Academic support.** Carla recalls supportive and strong relationships with her teachers “When I was younger, I was kinda like the teacher’s pet. Like all A’s and I was really intelligent.” She looked forward to the extra attention she received from her teachers because of her hard work “I actually liked a lot of my teachers from when I was in elementary school. They would tell my mom, like ask my mom if I could come spend the night over their house and stuff like that.” Carla recalls having good relationships with many of her elementary teachers:
You know how you always got picked for something…picked to be the line leader and stuff like that…you know stay after class, stay in the class with the teacher and eat lunch. That happened a lot, even with different teachers.

Once she began high school, Carla switched her focus from school to boys and hanging out with her friends. She transferred from Detroit Public Schools (DPS) to a suburban school district and identifies that move as the catalyst that initiated her academic disinterest “It was so different. We didn’t have uniforms. It wasn’t as strict. So, I made a lot of friends and then…my freshman year I did okay.” While there are many negative aspects of DPS, Carla clearly believes leaving DPS was not a good move for her. “We had structure and I was doing good. I had good grades. I wasn’t too worried about friends, boyfriends, stuff like that,” she recalls. Reflecting on her high school years and how things turned out academically, she notes, if she could go back and rewind her high school years, she would do a lot of things differently “mainly I would have been focused on what school is about and not just the social part of it. You can still be social and do your schoolwork, but I didn’t know how to balance the two.”

Instead of trying to create a balance between her social life and school, Carla started a romantic relationship with a young man, a relationship that increasingly demanded more and more of her time and attention “[My] sophomore year, I got a boyfriend, so that took up even more time…I wasn’t worried about school. I knew I could pass by.” And passing by is what she did; recalling her last couple years of high school, she admits, “You’re kinda careless in high school and you don’t really care about much, but what’s going on in the social world and stuff like that.”

Carla utilizes social media such as Facebook to keep in touch with the people who have positively influenced her and staying in contact with one of her teachers is important to Carla,
because “I just feel like sometimes there are certain people that you need to stay close to because they have connections to certain things,” and Carla believes her leadership teacher is just such a person. Described as “a really positive teacher and she wears her heart on her sleeve,” she organized trips to the American House, a home for elderly people and arranged for her students to volunteer there weekly during Carla’s senior year of high school. Carla remarked on her kindness saying, “she would cry about anything because she was like that, empathic towards people.” She helped get Carla involved in Challenge Day, a nationwide program that helps students find common ground among their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Carla was excited to participate in the program because it was the one activity besides singing that helped her feel connected in school and motivated to be a part of. Under her leadership teacher’s guidance, Carla participated in the event three years in a row, once as a student participant, second as a student leader and then third as an adult facilitator after graduation. Carla credits her leadership teacher with helping her to realize “you’re allowed to have feelings and you’re allowed to feel a certain type of way you know, you shouldn’t have to hide that.”

Carla surmised having caring teachers was great, but it did little to motivate Carla to prepare for college. Although Carla was into drama and singing in high school and performing in plays, her focus on academic subjects was weak “I mean my grades weren’t that bad. I was kinda a C average, but I could have did better, and I just, but I didn’t so.” Carla’s apathetic attitude towards school transferred into her college decision-making “I didn’t even think about going to a university. I wanted to go to college, but I didn’t think about any specific university that I really wanted to go to. So, I started out at community college.”

**College aspirations.** Whereas Eva could only dream about the opportunity to attend a four-year university, Carla had the opportunity and basically threw it away. Although she had
been accepted into Oakland University, she did not feel like she was ready to go to a university, so she began at a community college and did well during her first year. However, soon afterwards, she decided that the time was right to transfer to a four-year university:

I had decided that I wanted to go to a university and like stay on campus and it was two hours away. And, uh, yeah, I didn’t do too good. I just got caught up in partying and stuff and didn’t take it seriously…I just kinda gave up and I didn’t pass any of my classes.

Carla is open and honest about squandering her first semester at a four-year university and regrets her decision to give up so easily:

When I gave up my first semester of college—oh, it was just like ‘Oh, I’m done. I can’t do it anymore. I’ve already messed up so far. I didn’t do what I was supposed to do...’ It was just the moment of truth. There’s nothing more I can do, so I just had to give up and I just gave up the will...And, that was just really stupid looking back.

Carla realizes not only had she failed to take her opportunity to attend a four-year college seriously, but also she had not really focused on her education or her academic goals since elementary school.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** After being dismissed from the university, Carla had no plans to return. However, after thinking things through, she filed an appeal letter and was readmitted to the university. She owed the university three thousand dollars and remarkably her step grandmother offered to help her saying, “Look, I’ma pay this money for you,” and she gave her the money to pay back the university. Soon after her act of kindness she passed away. Carla was grief-stricken because she felt like they were just becoming close, but she feels that her grandmother helped steer her in the right direction by paying her university bill, and it also gave her a boost of confidence that someone thought that she could do it after failing so miserably.
However, Carla’s return to the university was not without its challenges; a couple of weeks before Carla was to return, Carla and her mom became homeless. Carla was conflicted, on one hand she fought so hard to get back to the university, but on the other hand, she could not fathom leaving her mom homeless after everything she had done to provide for her. Carla’s mom encouraged her to go back to the university and not to worry about her. She recalls her mom’s admonishment “Girl, if you don’t go to school and do what you gotta do. I’ma be fine. I’m grown.” Carla went back for another semester and passed her classes. She realized that the campus life was not for her and she returned home leaving campus life behind. Reflecting on her campus experiences she confesses:

I wasted a whole semester doing nothing and I blamed myself. So it hurts. I’m okay now, but it’s like looking back, dang! I wish I would have did better…I would have all A’s, I would have got a scholarship.

Currently, Carla is attending a community college and staying with her mom in her low-income, one bedroom apartment. Carla recently ended her long-term relationship with her live-in boyfriend “I mean I started out young. I thought like you always need somebody, it’s not good because you don’t always need somebody. You can have time alone and be by yourself.” She has come to the conclusion that she is too young to be in a committed relationship and did not like the restrictions her boyfriend wanted to place on her. She realizes she needs her freedom. She also has a new focus on her educational goals and says it stems from a success she recently experienced in another area of her life. Carla had recently moved in with her older brother and his family over her summer break. She discovered he had an exercise room and she began exercising daily and eating healthy food, and by the end of the summer, she found she lost over fifty pounds:
I’m motivated by a lot of different things and I have motivation to reach a lot of different goals…I didn’t do so well when it came to my first couple of years of college, and like those last years of high school, I didn’t care much and it’s like when you get older, you realize look either I’m gonna get this degree or I’m just gonna be working at McDonalds for the rest of my life. And I don’t want to work at McDonalds the rest of my life.

Her motivation is so strong now that she refuses to procrastinate with any of her class assignments. Carla says completing an assignment gives her a rewarding feeling knowing “yes, I did it.” She reasons “even if I don’t get the best grade on it, I still tried and I did it.” Carla believes she has learned a lot about the person she was and the person she has become over these last couple of turbulent college years:

I did feel like it taught me a lot because I would never give up. I would always give it my all whether I fail or don’t fail. You still gotta try. You still gotta get up and go to class.

Although Carla jokes about the fact she never visited the library at the university she attended and did not even know where it was located, that is not the case now “I feel like I’m self-motivated now today because I feel like if I don’t do good this semester then I’m done.” Carla sees no real reason to keep racking up student loans and owing money if she is not going to get serious and “either you gonna go to school [and] get it right and do it right or you’re not.” After reflecting on the many hurdles she has jumped, she states, “I just gotta to do it right and be you know self-motivated and cause I can do it and I know I can do it and I’ve done it.”

Carla and her mother had to depend on family members to provide them with housing and daily necessities after they were homeless and Carla cannot envision a future where she has to constantly depend on other people to help her:
I care now because I care about my future and I don’t want to have that future where I’m going to my relative’s house begging them for stuff, always needing a place to stay, can’t take care of myself. I don’t want to be taken care of. I want to be able to take care of myself. It’s you know, I have to.

Hopefully, Carla has inherited the same determination Carla’s mother summoned up when she entered drug rehabilitation to cease her drug addiction, and it will assist her in winning her fight for economic freedom, a sense of personal accomplishment, and the ability to provide for herself and her family by completing her college degree.

**Halle: Little Girl Lost**

**Family profile.** Halle is a 19-year-old, African American college student; she has a maturity that is unusual for her age. Halle is the youngest of her mother’s two children and the oldest of her father’s four children. Halle is a ball of energy and her words tumble out so fast it is an exercise in itself to catch them all. As our first interview accelerates, the pace of her words carries along her life story, fast and furious. Her biological parents were never married. Halle has a brother 16 years her senior, who has a different father. Although her brother has been out of the house since she was a toddler “he was always a part of my life, whatever I need just whatever, he was there…my dad was in and out.” Her father has not been a consistent parent, and this has caused many disagreements and hurt feelings between them especially on Halle’s end, “When I was four, my dad went off and had another baby, which is my little sister.” Her dad’s infidelity caused her parents to separate, and Halle’s dad rarely came around to see her even though he only moved three blocks away.

Having taken on adult responsibilities since she was fourteen, Halle took on a huge amount of responsibility for the upkeep of her family and their home while in high school “It
was kinda hard for me you know, high school is supposed to be like the best four years of your life and I was kinda going through it because my mom was all I had.” Halle’s mom underwent knee surgery that was not successful, so they performed a second surgery. In the second surgery the doctors performed a complete knee replacement and she suffered further complications, so they went back and finally corrected the problem “She had three surgeries in all, so ninth, tenth and eleventh grade, I was kinda going through it.”

Because they did not spend a lot of quality time together, Halle cherishes the times she has shared with her dad, especially during family celebrations. At one such celebration her dad’s callous and uncaring remark pierced her deeply, like a knife in the heart. Halle’s dad was taking some of his nieces and nephews with him as he was leaving the restaurant they were all at, and his sister told him not to kidnap her son. His reply, “If I don’t want to be bothered with my own kids, what makes you think I’m going to keep yours,” and it caused everyone at the table to turn and look at Halle, “I just got up and walked off and just started crying, like you don’t say stuff like that.” With everything going on in her life, she decided to concentrate on her future and let her relationship with her father go for the time being.

Halle was attending the School of Fine Arts (SFA) high school within Detroit Public Schools (DPS). She had always shown a talent and interest in drawing, “drawing was my escape, I would just go outside, whether it was a coloring book, pen or pencil, I would just draw.” Halle’s passion for drawing began to wane once she entered SFA; the school’s focus was more towards structured drawing and “it wasn’t the kinda drawing I liked to do.” However, while still in high school, Halle had to grow up fast “adulthood started kicking in and so, I didn’t have time to sit down and draw.” It’s not the first time a young high school student has had to contribute to the family’s financial needs but Halle says it was more psychological than just the money she
had to earn for her family. She also had to learn how to manage their household finances. She conveys the challenges she encounters trying to keep their household together:

I started working, I had to help her [mom] pay bills and you know I had to shop on my own. I had to go grocery shopping without my mom. I had to learn how to drive at an early [age], I was out driving with no license at fifteen you know getting groceries hoping the police don’t pull me over.

**Academic support.** During this hectic time in Halle’s life her teachers at SFA “had my back whether I needed anything for school whether it was supplies, underwear, a ride home.” The dean of students, Mrs. Hall, and her art teacher, Ms. Raymond were two teachers in particular that were always there for her. Ms. Raymond and Halle’s mother became extremely close and are still in constant communication and continue to be great friends.

There are two sides to Halle’s personality, and although she was selected to mentor other students, and participated in early college program between her high school and the local community college, she struggled with issues of self-control. In reflection, Halle suspects her teachers may have had ulterior motives selecting her to speak to other students about their aggressive behavior hoping it may help her to recognize her own anger issues. Her teachers noticed that she was carrying all of her stress and anxiety about her mother’s condition with her into the school setting and angrily interacting with the other students. Finally, one of her high school teachers pulled her to the side and inquired, “You so angry, you know, why you are so angry?” Halle realized that going through “the surgeries with my mom, she wasn’t working and I started working at sixteen,” and the stress of everything was causing her to act out in school. Grateful to her teacher for taking the time to talk with her and find out what she was going through, she adds “she stills keep in contact with me on Facebook and the telephone.”
idea of college finally crept into Halle’s busy schedule, she had to hurry and ask for last minute recommendation letters from her teachers. “Because I had the support system of the school” she was able to get all of her college applications into the colleges on time.

**College aspirations.** Halle attended a four-year university located in southeastern Michigan. During her first semester of college, she did not perform well academically and after repeating her poor academic performance her second semester she was dismissed from the university. Halle became pregnant and the stress of the unplanned pregnancy causes her to lose focus on school. Her mother was upset with her and, in Halle’s opinion, not as supportive as she would have liked and they became distant.

Feeling abandoned and scared, Halle called her paternal grandmother and aunt and confided in them about her pregnancy. She recalls their reassuring response “We all entitled to one-mess-up.” As Halle entered her second trimester, her mother finally started to accept the fact that Halle was having a baby. However, she miscarried. To rub salt into the wound, Halle’s brother’s fiancée became pregnant at the same time and she had to endure the bittersweet pain of losing her baby and welcoming theirs and admits, “I held a grudge against her.”

Although still rebounding from the painful experience of losing her baby, she felt like maybe things happen for a reason. After she lost their baby, her boyfriend, who had soured on school and getting a legitimate job, decided to start selling drugs. She received a phone call from a close friend a couple of months after the miscarriage informing her that her ex-boyfriend (she had broken up with him when he decided to pursue his new dangerous lifestyle) was arrested for first-degree murder. Halle was stunned and believes that despite the sadness from the loss of the pregnancy, she was not ready to be a single mother, having watched her mother struggle to maintain their family and household for so many years “my mom is fifty-four, she’s not working,
she’s trying to find work now.” Bearing witness to her mother’s daily struggle for survival, Halle realized that single motherhood is a challenging proposition.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** After being dismissed by the university Halle returned home and, although home was familiar territory and comforting, it was not conducive to achieving any of her academic goals. She realized that being in the city [Detroit] was not the best option for her “I need to get back in school and get away from this city, because I was just getting into trouble and hanging out with the wrong crowd.” After contemplating her actions, “I had to take you know tough evaluation” she felt that returning to school was her best option. She relates:

I guess my motivation was me seeing the girls in my neighborhood not graduate from high school, have kids, they didn’t go back and get their GED. Guys getting killed every day, which I grew up with. And it’s real serious, like over this past weekend, they found three bodies and I was there. So, for that to have happened right in my neighborhood, that kinda made me push a little harder just for tomorrow.

Halle appealed the decision to dismiss her from the university and was readmitted. She completed the next semester and decided to attend the community college that is located in the same small college town where her university is, two hours from home. Unlike Carla, Halle had no qualms about leaving her four-year university and attending a community college “it’s twenty of us in a classroom, twenty, twenty-two of us. And our teachers are more so trying to figure out your names, and they want to know who you are and you know come to office hours.” Besides the academic camaraderie Halle experienced at her new community college, she also appreciated the financial benefit switching from a four-year university to a community college presented. Halle was now eligible to receive tuition assistance from the State of Michigan’s Tuition
Incentive Program (TIP). The scholarship is awarded in three phases, and Halle was eligible to receive Phase I, which the community college she now attended accepts. Previously, she was not able to utilize the TIP scholarship because she was not attending a Phase I school. The four-year university Halle was attending only accepted Phases II and III of the TIP Scholarship. Phase I basically covered all of her educational expenses at the community college, and it was the financially responsible thing to do. The only problem Halle now faced was that there were no student dorms provided by the community college, so she had to find and pay for her own apartment and find reliable transportation to get to and from school, as well as any job she would be lucky enough to secure. After obtaining a sales position at the local mall, she eventually had to give it up because the public transportation took hours to get her there and back, cutting into her school schedule and homework time:

I was working at Footlocker, I was catching the bus, it’s an hour to get to the mall. You leave the campus, you have to go down to the transit center, take a bus from there to the mall you know, it stops in between, trying to work, still being able to study, you know cuts into your hours that cuts into your money!

After securing reliable transportation, a 2007 car, Halle found a new job however she had the added expense of paying for car insurance. One benefit of her new job was that it paid more, but the hours conflicted with her school schedule. She worked “third shift at a plant, twelve to eight, Monday through Friday,” and although in the beginning she believed she could handle the

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2 The Higher Education Appropriations Act funds TIP annually. TIP scholarships are available to Michigan high school students who have or had Medicaid coverage for two consecutive years within a 3-year period (State of Michigan, n.d.).
schedule, eventually she had to drop two out of her four classes because of the time restraints her new job placed on her daily schedule:

Working at this new job, I mean like it’s, it’s keeping the bills paid, it’s keeping whatever else, food on the table, but it’s hard working, doing an eight hour shift and then coming home only sleeping three hours and then I got to get right back up and go to class. And then after class a lot of times, I can’t come back here and just go to sleep because I got a paper that’s due, or I need to study for a quiz, or I need to start my study guide and I’ll just be so tired that I’ll push it to the side.

Halle confessed she is lonely away at school with no family members around, and so she comes home almost every weekend. Her parents ask her why she comes home every weekend, and Halle always responds with “because I miss y’all that’s why.” It could also be that she may be staggering a little under the enormous emotional weight her family has placed on her shoulders. All of her other cousins are in bad situations, as she summarizes:

[They] just out here scamming, other cousins working in strip clubs or in the bar or either they locked up in jail. Like I’m the only one, the shining hope. The only hope and my family they push me to a certain extent, I wish they could do more financially, but just call, “Hey are you okay? Do you need anything?”

The positive impact that her decision to attend college has on her family members is evident by the reception she receives when she comes home:

My nieces and nephews, my sisters and my brothers, like my little cousins. I’m that big cousin, big sister…whatever you want to call me, all the kids in the family look up to me. My family kinda puts me on a pedestal because I’m in school.
That is why her recent thoughts about returning home and going to a community college in the city is currently weighing heavily on her mind:

Well for starters, the whole paying rent, buying food out of pocket, gas money and all that, that’s taking a toll on me and I’m only nineteen. I want to be on my own; it’s nice having my own. I can come and go as I please and do what I want, but truth be told, I’m not ready, I’m not mentally stable to be out here on my own.

Halle has had some volunteer and mentoring opportunities where she is currently attending school and working, which is helpful because her career goal is to one-day “work with juvenile delinquents.” However, Halle continues to wrestle with her decision; there are good reasons to stay where she is despite the attraction of returning home to Detroit.

One bright note about returning home to Detroit is Halle’s mother is currently enrolled in school and completing an Associate Degree in Child Development at a local community college. Halle believes her mom “will be down for me to come home” and she knows “she is miserable without me.” She likes being able to talk with her mother about classes, and her mom understanding what she is going through because she is experiencing it as well. She is hopeful that they will both be walking across that stage accomplishing their dream of getting a college degree together.

Pam: Fighting for the Home Team

**Family profile.** Motherhood can be a demanding and daunting endeavor; especially single motherhood. Now imagine being a nine-year-old child, self-charged with taking care of a baby. Pam, an 18-year-old, African American college freshman thought that it was her duty as a big sister to take care of her little brother when he was born. She took the responsibility of taking care of her brother so seriously, especially since her mother was a single parent that her grades
began to suffer in school. As irrational as it sounded, she admittedly says, “Yeah, I don’t know, I just felt like that was my responsibility because my mom worked a lot, so I felt he was my responsibility and I kind of slacked in my grades.” Pam’s mother demanded that Pam focus on her grades and stop trying to be a nine-year-old “mother.” Struggling with letting go of her need to take care of her little brother, whom she saw as “my responsibility.” Pam persisted in playing mom, her grades were dropping and her only concern was, “Did he get his milk? Did he do this? I was young too, but I felt like that was my responsibility for a year almost.”

Admitting that once her little brother was born “it was just like all my attention went to him,” Pam accepted her mother’s assertion that she improve her grades “she was really, really hard about grades. When you come home and your grades are bad, she’s going to talk about everything you do.” Slowly, she began to realize that school should and was her first priority. She recalled getting pressured from her teachers to snap out of her mommy fog and return to her former role as a conscientious student. Pam would overhear her teachers’ comments about her academic behavior “She’s good, she has more potential than that. She [just] sits in class.” Comments like this and her mother’s strong insistence that she improve her failing grades motivated her to refocus and concentrate on her schoolwork “My grades were low. I had D’s and I wasn’t passing my tests and things like that. I started back studying and started passing my tests and my teachers were proud and my parents were proud.” Pam’s mother also ensured she got back on the right path educationally by sending her to afterschool programs and afterschool tutoring sessions. Pam also experienced test anxiety and wondered if that could also be a contributing reason why her grades were suffering “When I get to a test, I forget everything. My head just freezes. I have to take some time just looking at it and I’m like, okay I remember this.”
**Academic support.** Pam constantly struggled with test anxiety as she matriculated through school. She struggled with math. She admits she struggled with math constantly. Although Pam was struggling academically, she had friends she was close to and “their grades were good.” Surrounding herself with friends that were first-rate students was important and proved to be beneficial. She initially struggled with math around the third grade and began leaning on her friends for academic support because “their grades were fine, but when it came to math, I was always the one lacking, so they would try to help me.” Pam remembers her best friend trying to help her with math and trying to explain math problems to her “Oh, you’re supposed to do it like this.” Laughing at the memory she recalls, “She would correct me.” They are still good friends and continue to support one another in their educational pursuits. Her teachers were also helpful and tried to assist her as she advanced educationally. Pam also received educational and emotional support from her family. Her mother attended all of her parent teacher conferences, and her family supported her in all of her extracurricular activities.

Pam has been active in dance class, tap dancing to be exact, since she was in second grade and fondly remembered performing her tap dancing routines at the Michigan State Fair and for retirement home residents around Metropolitan Detroit. Her eyes shine brightly as she recalls looking out into the audience and seeing all of her family sitting out there cheering her on during her tap dance performances “I was proud that I had the support because I’ll be nervous when I’m getting out there, and then when I see them and how many people it is, I’m just like, I got this and I’ll keep going.” Hearing her mother’s encouraging words in the back of her mind, “Just keep going,” helped her kick her legs a little higher and created an extra bounce in her step. Pam received encouragement and academic support from several teachers throughout her educational journey.
During our first interview, Pam recalls her middle school math teacher, Ms. Reed as really nice and “she helped me a lot.” She gratefully acknowledges Ms. Reed’s patience as she “walked her through it [math],” but Ms. Reed left the school before Pam finished middle school, and she was left to navigate math once again on her own. Another high school teacher that proved to be helpful to Pam was her English composition teacher, Ms. Kinsley “she was the right one [teacher] and I’m glad I had that class because once I got to college, it really helped me. I knew everything they were doing.” After completing her first semester of college and on a return trip to her high school, Pam informed her former teacher of how well she fared in her college English course and how much she truly appreciated all of the instruction she received. Ms. Kinsley laughed and replied, “Oh! See, I told you. All that complaining, but see, it paid off!”

**College aspirations.** Making it to college has been a dream of Pam’s since middle school, “probably after eighth grade graduation, I was ready for my next graduation and then I was like, well after that graduation, I’m going to college.” The importance of higher education has always been stressed in her family. Pam’s uncle, being a college graduate himself, would often question her about her college aspirations. Is she thinking about colleges? Which ones are interesting to her and why? Does she know what she wants to major in? These question and answer sessions helped her stay focused on her goal of attending college and determining what careers might interest her. There was one career option that has been in the back of Pam’s mind for a while—the prospect of enlisting in the Navy as a medic. Her maternal grandfather served in the Navy, and during the final days before his death, many of his Navy buddies would come by their house to visit and sit with him and talk about their many adventures serving their country. Witnessing first-hand the camaraderie they shared prompted Pam to explore the Navy as a viable post-education option. However, after taking the Navy Entrance Exam and talking with her close
friend about her experiences in Army Boot Camp, Pam decided attending a university was the right move for her after all.

Initially interested in attending the University of Detroit (U of D), Pam and her mother attended an orientation/information session for prospective students. Disappointment set in once she became aware of the cost associated with attending U of D “Yeah, it was like $32,000. I can’t get no financial aid. I didn’t qualify for Tuition Incentive Program (TIP),” which is funded by the state of Michigan. “Oh, you’re going to have to find somewhere else to go,” Pam’s mother commented after she discovered the cost of attendance. She worked as a special education bus attendant for Detroit Public Schools (DPS), so her financial contribution towards her daughter’s college tuition and related expenses was limited. And although Pam’s father owned a couple of car dealerships and Pam worked part-time as his secretary, she relied mainly on her mother for financial support. Her mom has worked up to three jobs at a time trying to provide for her and her brother. Pam is grateful to her mother for always being there for her and her many sacrifices “she helped me all the way through no matter what, no matter what it was she had to do to get it, I got it.” Pam’s parents are still a couple but live separately. The downside to her parents remaining a couple is that Pam’s father’s income is a factor in her financial aid considerations. Pam never questioned her mother and father’s living arrangement and defended her father’s lack of financial support when asked about it. She stated that working for him helped her out financially.

Ms. Black, Pam’s school counselor worked hard to find scholarships for the graduating senior students who were interested in attending college “she was trying to see whatever scholarships we could get. She was very good.” Actually there were two counselors who helped students to apply for scholarships for college, “they was always trying to find a way where we
could get any type of money, scholarships, making sure our grades were fine.” The high school’s academic policy encouraged students to maintain their grades and suspended a student’s extracurricular activities if their grades fell below the school’s academic standards. Pam recalls, “They will set it up like you can’t go to activities if your grades weren’t good.”

Pam maintained her good grades however she still experienced difficulties finding funding opportunities that would support her tuition at a four-year university, so she began to rethink her plan to attend U of D. Knowing that scoring a high score on the ACT exam would help ensure scholarship opportunities, Pam really tried hard to score a 22 on her ACT in hopes of gaining a scholarship. Shaking her head at the memory, she continues, “I took it I think twice. The other time I got an 18, but I really wanted a 22 or higher. That was my main focus and I didn’t get it.” After failing to secure any substantial funding for attendance at a four-year university, Pam decided that attending a community college was her best option, and she enrolled in one located in a suburb near the city of Detroit, in southeastern Michigan.

Recalling the excitement of finally realizing her dream of being a college student she says, “At first I was very eager, I’m ready to start college. And, now when I get to math…” Her voice trails off and she recounted her freshman college math experience:

My first one [math class], it was fine. I went straight through that and then my second one, I had troubles with it, but I ended up getting a tutor and he showed me different ways to do it because the teacher I guess didn’t have a lot of time, so they just flashed right through it.

Finishing her first year of college successfully, Pam’s mother was so proud of her and advised her to “Just keep it up. Don’t stop. Keep it up. Keep going.” Her mother had also been in college and received her associate degree before she gave up her studies to devote more time to
her children, and Pam believes this is why her mother pushed her so hard to go to college and obtain a college degree. Pam tells her mother’s story as a kind of cautionary tale “she went to school for teaching and ended up just being a bus attendant for special needs children for 17 years.” Pam’s grandmother did not finish high school, but when it comes to Pam’s educational pursuits, “she’s on it.” Receiving similar encouragement from her grandmother, Pam states, “She’s like my mom. They act alike, look alike. She pushed me and always told me that whatever you want to do, you can do it. Just stay focused and get it done.” Both her mother and grandmother are very supportive when it comes to her education.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** The encouragement of her family and teachers enabled Pam to set high academic goals, resulting in her enrollment in college credit courses at her high school her senior year. She carried ten college credits with her when she enrolled in a community college. Pam took advantage of the opportunity to attend pre-college courses because it allowed her to accumulate almost a half semester of college course credits. Her first year in college she was really focused and passed all of her courses, even her math class with the help of her tutor. Reflecting on the completion of her first year of college she enthuses:

> I went to school and got my classes, my books and I went to class. I was at class every day. I never missed, but when I had an accident, a car accident, that’s the only day I missed classes. And, my GPA was a 3.5 the first semester, so I think I did pretty good.

Pam decided to regroup over the summer to prepare for her second year at her community college, but her mother persuaded her to attend summer school. She went from considering taking three summer courses to four or five after her mother’s prodding. Giving in to her mother’s persuasive encouragement to “keep going” is something Pam has been used to doing, “when I’m already there, she pushes me more.” Although, she was not considering taking
any summer classes, her mother’s insistent nudging, “You can do it. You can do more classes,” convinced her to take four summer classes. Although her mother pushed her hard to do her best, Pam says she has been motivated by a desire to achieve more than her family has before her “I want it for myself, but they’re there, and I see what they did and I want to get past them.” Pam’s father completed three years of college before he became an entrepreneur and opened his car dealerships.

Pam’s real goal has been to obtain a hospital internship. She aspires to become a physical therapist and wanted the opportunity to shadow some physical therapists to make sure that is the right career choice for her. Her attempts to obtain an internship have been fruitless, mainly due to the fact that her college does not have a physical therapy internship program available. Subsequently she began to think about military service and decided to enlist in the National Guard. Her mother’s initial statement, “You not gonna to do that,” evoked feelings of trepidation, yet she is determined to follow through on her plan to join the National Guard. Pam’s mother reluctantly agreed to attend the upcoming orientation meeting with Pam, giving her hope that she will eventually support her decision to join the National Guard. After the meeting, Pam will be sent to another office to take all of her required physicals and exams. And after telling the enlisting officer about her test anxiety, and she will be given a practice test to prepare for the actual one.

She states the main reason she is going to the National Guard is to take advantage of the tuition assistance they provide and “I get to travel.” The National Guard will provide 80% of her tuition when she completes her assignment and returns home. She will only be required to report to duty two weekends a month, if there is no war or immediate national crisis. She sees joining the National Guard opens the door to attending a four-year university and brings the possibility
of attending University of Detroit closer to reality than if she did not enlist “When I come back, I’m still going to school.” Acknowledging how important it is to her mother that she obtains her college degree she reasons, “That is very important to her and [she] wants me to go further than her.” She hopefully exclaims, “I’m getting there.” And, although Pam’s mother, grandmother, father, friends and teachers encouraged her to work hard academically, “It was always in my head that I’m going to school and I’m doing this. I’m very determined. What I say I want, I’m going to go get it, and I’m trying to keep that mindset towards my education.”

Nikki: Her Brother’s Keeper

**Family profile.** Nikki is a 19-year-old, African American female college student, who attends a community college in southeastern Michigan. Nikki is shy and quiet spoken. Her relationship with her maternal grandmother has helped her weather the emotional storms her family has experienced. Nikki and her little brother have different fathers. Nikki’s father left the family when she was very young and she acknowledges she actually had a better relationship with her brother’s father than with her own dad.

After her little brother was born and his dad noticed he had developmental problems, he left their family as well. Nikki’s little brother was diagnosed with autism at the age of three. Although she provided her mother with unconditional support and assistance through the difficult process of accepting the diagnosis, Nikki struggled with it as well. She devotes most of her free time to caring for her brother, who is currently nine years old and attending a specialized educational program at his elementary school. Meeting her brother’s special education bus every day after school and taking care of him until her mother gets home from work limits Nikki’s ability to look for part-time work. This childcare arrangement is so critical and beneficial for Nikki’s mother that if she did find a part-time job, it would cause a childcare dilemma for her
mother trying to find a latch-key arrangement with his special needs, so Nikki decided to babysit other latch-key children to earn spending money.

Nikki’s recalls how her father just disappeared from her life. She holds both arms in the air and flips them saying, “when I got here and you just fell off the face of the earth.” Although Nikki admits when she was younger, she always tried to keep in touch with her dad. She called him on holidays and on his birthday. After awhile she just gave up, “he was never really around when I was growing up, but when I got like 15 or 16, he was always trying to come around and play the dad role and I’m like, I don’t even know you honestly.” He comes around when he wants to show off a new purchase or brag about a new job. Using a deep baritone voice she begins mimicking her father, “Oh, I got a new car and I want to show you that I got a new car.”

Nikki says relationships with her family (her mother, grandmother, little brother, her cousins and her aunts) buffers the blow of her father’s indifference towards her, but during certain times, like father/daughter dances at school, the pain of his absence was still unavoidable, but, “I kinda got content with his absence, like him not being around was kind of good. Like I don’t really care. I don’t call him.”

**Academic support.** Nikki commented during the first interview on the loss of a close family member whom she deeply loved and cared about and how her death impacted her in such an emotional and substantial manner that it has taken her years to recuperate from it. Nikki shares the emotional event that catapulted her into a downward academic spiral: the loss of her maternal grandmother:

I started struggling just in school in general when I was in about seventh grade. My grandmother was like a really big part of my life. She really made me who I am and she passed away and I kind of just was like, this is pointless!
She lost her drive to care about or do anything. She knew that she was failing in school, but she just did not know how to overcome her grief “I would go to school every day and do nothing and just sit there and when it came time for report card, my mom is like so distraught because she knows it’s not me.” Nikki admits she was aware of the pain she was causing her mother, but she felt like “I don’t have a choice…this is how I feel.”

Nikki’s mother was not hard on her, but she was persistent. She constantly reminded her that she had to do better. Her mother would often give her little pep talks like, “you have goals that you want to achieve and you’re not going to achieve them with these kind of grades.”

Nikki’s mom is a social worker and knows the benefits of counseling, so she took Nikki to get help with dealing with her grief over losing her grandmother. Although she appreciated her mother’s desire to help her through counseling, she felt like her counselor did little to alleviate her painful loss:

I know their job is like trying to help you, but it just seemed like I was always wrong.

Like okay, I’m telling you how I feel and you’re basically telling me how I feel is wrong and that’s not going to help me.

Although Nikki felt that the counseling was not helpful in dealing with her grief, she began to discover the roots of her anger. Nikki did a real serious self-assessment:

I guess I just snapped out of my funk …I kind of realized like when I was growing up, I had a really good childhood, but then it was like I didn’t kinda like the cards I was dealt…so, I was just angry at myself and just the world basically.

Nikki decided to let go of her anger and accept the things she could not change and work on what she could change. She began focusing on the things that matter to her and her family,
such as her education. She realized that not only was it an uphill battle to bring her grades back up to passing, but she needed to put in extra effort regarding one particular subject: math.

Although she was receiving tutoring Nikki struggled saying, “It doesn’t seem to just click with me,” because it took her longer to “grasp the smallest concepts.” She needed a teacher who could be really “thorough and consistent.” Unfortunately her middle school teacher did not possess those characteristics “she wasn’t really diligent… she kind of just expected us to know. She had problems with like repeating herself … I was just kinda like on my own.”

Nikki assessed her time in middle school and stated that what made that time in her academic life really difficult was she was actually trying. She continues, “I was asking questions and it was always huffing and puffing or asking me am I listening.” Nikki states how frustrating it was for her, and how difficult it was to stay committed to learning despite her teacher’s negative response to her questions. She says she would always respond with, “Yes, I’m listening, but I’m just not understanding, so would you mind repeating that?” At parent teacher conference, when her mother broached the subject of the teacher’s impatience with Nikki during class, Nikki concluded that her teacher was aware of the negative impact of her actions because she lied and said, “Oh no, I try to help as much as I can.”

The memory of her grandmother and what she would want for her and the different things her grandmother talked about for her future helped guide Nikki to calmer and more focused thinking “I think it was always the constant reminder of my grandma just telling me, ‘you can do this, you got this, that help pull me from the depths of despair.’” Although Nikki started rebounding academically, her nemesis, math was still there waiting on her freshman school schedule. Her math woes continued into high school, and she found herself attending summer school for the first time because of her math performance. She admits that not only was
the transition to high school overwhelming, but “I was lost in math and he’s [the math teacher] like throwing new stuff at me. I’m like I didn’t even get what was before this, so yeah…I had to go to summer school.” What made the experience “horrible” was the fact that she was also still struggling with the loss of her grandmother.

Nikki continued to struggle with math through tenth grade, and a glimmer of hope shone brightly in the form of a new math teacher during her eleventh and twelfth grades of high school. Nikki says, “He was really a good teacher.” Nikki received a C in math and began to really concentrate on improving her grades, so that she could attend a college upon graduation.

College aspirations. Nikki decided she wanted to major in occupational therapy, a field that she became interested in since her little brother was diagnosed with autism. Subsequently, Nikki realized from accompanying her mother and brother to so many of the different therapy sessions, he was participating in that she “could do that. I could really do that and that’s something I care about.” Nikki began to think this could be her calling and recalls the times in school when she had been summoned to the office to help the school administrators calm down another high school student with autism who has a real bad temper when he became anxious “I’d go down and like; it’s going to be okay, just relax, calm down, just sit. When I’d talk to him he’d just be fine and I was like well maybe this is what I’m supposed to do.”

Nikki initially applied and was accepted into Bowling Green University. She was grateful she was accepted into the university, but realized,

I didn’t want to go there. The reason I didn’t leave home was because my brother was diagnosed with autism and I just didn’t want to leave my mom…my mom is not married…she’s a single mother and I don’t want to leave her here by herself.
The only problem with becoming an occupational therapist, Nikki stated is that “there are so many math classes.” She was determined not to allow her “math phobia” to stop her from reaching her goal “I don’t want to change what I want to do in life just for that reason, but at the same time it’s like I’m never going to reach my goal if I can’t do this.” Nikki’s brother’s occupational therapist informed her about the Occupational Therapy Program at Wayne State University (WSU) and suggested she look into it after she shared her career goals with him. Nikki anticipated a roadblock with regards to applying to Wayne State University’s Occupational Therapy Program, saying “my grades are terrible… I’m never going to get into Wayne State just applying fresh out of school …so, I need something else to do in order to get there, to like raise up my grade point average.”

Deciding the best course of action was to attend a community college, so that she could raise her GPA, she enrolled in a community college in the suburban area of the city of Detroit. Her goal was to complete her liberal arts courses at the community college and raise her GPA so that she could apply later to WSU’s Occupational Therapy Program. At first, Nikki was a little hesitant telling others about her plans to attend community college, concerned that they might hold the belief that attending a community college instead of a four-year university was a sign of being below par academically and might cause some of her classmates to judge her as deficient. She credits two of her high school counselors with helping her to overcome her anxiety about what her high school classmates might think or say about her educational choice. They let her know that things were going to be okay. She recalls being encouraged by the reassuring words they spoke to her, “You have to do what you have to do. Just worry about you and focus on your grades and get where you want to be.” In hindsight, Nikki realizes that the person who was most disappointed with her academic performance was herself. Envisioning going off to the
University of Houston after her graduation, she had to come to terms with her decision that, because of her choices and life circumstances, she needed to attend community college in order to get her educational journey back on track.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** Nikki struggled with math in her first year of college. The real problem seemed to be consistency with her math teachers, “I got into Elementary Algebra…my teacher was cool. And then I got into Math 1100 and my professor was just horrible.” The latter professor was evasive during math class, and Nikki began circling the problems she needed help with and going to the professor after class for assistance. She says he would help but not enough for it to stick for her. She had a friend who took the same class and dropped it. She told Nikki, “I can’t even keep up. He doesn’t want to help.”

Nikki, feeling the same exact way, dropped the class as well. She went to her community college administrators to complain about the professor, she explained his teaching method:

He’ll put a problem up, kind of explain, just run through it and then give us like six problems to do and then we’re moving on. I’m like wait a minute, slow down. Where did you get that [answer] from?

The best course of action, Nikki surmised was to find the professor from her first math course and stick with him, “he was a really good teacher and I actually passed that class with a B. I never got a B in math.” Reflecting on the previous classes she was successful in Nikki states, “When I did have a teacher who was really dedicated to their job and really actually wanted to see you excel and actually understand it, I noticed that my grades were better.”

That B grade led to finishing her first year of college with a 3.9 GPA. Nikki’s mom was ecstatic about her academic progress and extremely proud of her daughter and the many struggles she overcame. The ability to conquer her educational lethargy led to Nikki reflecting on
her academic improvement, “It made me feel good, but it’s like I can do that in college, but I couldn’t do that in high school. But, for some reason to me, college is easier.” She also decided to be more proactive about her math struggles:

I think I’m going to try to start now by just kind of looking into it and doing little practice problems. I think it will be a lot better if I give it a little more time…with math, I think I need to just get a little bit more energy and stop thinking that I’m supposed to get it right off the bat.

Nikki’s confidence has returned with her academic success, and “it just made me feel like it [graduating from college] can be done basically.” She definitely has a host of family and friends encouraging her and believing she can achieve her goals “My friends, they really do well in school. So, I don’t want to be the slacker of the group.” And although her goal of becoming an occupational therapist means that she will have to try to overcome her “math phobia,” Nikki just sees the math classes she has to take as “a minor roadblock.” After all, she says, “If that’s going to deter me from my goal, then there’s no point even trying it.” She knows her grandmother “wouldn’t want me not to try.” Nikki says there’s a difference between trying and failing, but to not try at all, “that’s not how she raised me.” Nikki’s grandmother always instilled in her to be her best. Remembering her grandmother’s words of encouragement, Nikki repeats them with passion, “push yourself, because if you don’t, who will?” Since reflecting on her life and decided to embrace it and be thankful, Nikki’s mindset has changed and she is a more positive person “This is life and you got to make the best of it because you only get one shot.” Taking her best aim, her goal is to become an occupational therapist, so she can help her brother and other young children just like him.
Conclusion/Summary

Post-secondary students attend community colleges for a myriad of reasons. The narratives of Eva and Pam are examples of high school students who, upon graduation, were not financially prepared to attend a four-year university and manage the fees associated with housing, tuition, books, meal plans and other miscellaneous costs and so they made an alternative choice - community college because of its lower cost. Nikki chooses community college for one of its advantages: to take courses that allow for GPA improvement, thus increasing the chance of obtaining admittance into a four-year university. Halle’s narrative demonstrates a preference for the benefits associated with a small community college such as smaller classes and a more intimate educational setting compared to a bigger university. Community college, in Halle’s opinion, provided a better opportunity to make connections with professors, unlike the larger university she attended that had hundreds of students in one lecture class. The intimate college setting has allowed Halle to create more social networks with professors and other college faculty, leading to her experience more personalized interactions, which assist in building social capital that she can utilize to maximize her educational opportunities. Halle found comfort in the fact that she was not attending a university with thousands of other students.

Early admission programs between high schools and community colleges offer high school students the opportunity to complete a number of college courses and, in some cases, complete the course requirements for an associate’s degree by the time they graduate high school, thus greatly eliminating a percentage of the cost of attending a four-year university. Eva, Pam and Halle all took advantage of this option while they were high school students, allowing them to enter their post-secondary schooling with college credits, thereby eliminating some of the coursework and time to complete their liberal arts courses or obtain their associate’s degree.
Community colleges can provide students with an alternative method of completing all of their liberal arts courses before transferring to a four-year college and obtaining their bachelor’s degree, which is the main reason Pam chose a community college and why Eva decided to stay and complete her associate’s degree at her community college.

Community colleges also provide post-secondary students, who may have faltered under the tutelage of a four-year university, time to readjust their academic focus and slow down the academic pace. Carla’s and Halle’s narratives attest to this scenario, and many other post-secondary students experience trying to balance their newfound freedom with the demands of their academic lives fail to succeed. Community college can be a safe academic haven for students who have been placed on academic probation at four-year universities and who need time to prove to themselves, family members and university administrators that they are capable of maintaining and passing college level courses. Whatever the reasons, community colleges provide a wealth of opportunities for post-secondary students to improve their educational choices and create real options for their academic futures while creating a route leading to four-year universities.
Chapter 5: Four-Year Universities: The Promised Land

In this chapter the stories of four young African American women are presented, illuminating their challenges based on race, gender, and class divisions and how they have learned to navigate both environments (home and school) to pursue their post-secondary educational goals. Brooke is grateful for the respite that moving away to attend a four-year university gave her from her emotionally abusive stepfather and her passive mother. Lisa just wants to get a good job after she gets her college degree, so that she can provide for her mother and keep her out of mental health institutions. Mimi wants to be a doctor and care for others, although her own parents could not take care of her or her siblings during a crucial time in their young lives. Mimi and her siblings were put in foster care and sent to live with relatives who were not kind and begrudged their pseudo-orphan status, but not the checks that came with it. Olivia is determined to make something of herself despite her mother’s emotional, financial and spiritual abandonment. These young women’s life histories are stories of resilience and persistence, and the determination to make something of themselves against all odds.

Brooke, Lisa, Mimi, and Olivia have all demonstrated academic optimism in their schooling lives through the attainment of their post-secondary educational status. They have had to overcome homelessness, foster care placements, abusive stepfathers, mentally ill parents, and abusive mothers to reach the promised land of four-year universities. Their educational journeys are heroic stories of resilience and persistence in intense and disturbing detail. They have held on to a glimmer of academic hope when there was just a tiny sparkle of light leading their educational paths. A kind word from a teacher, a gesture of support, an educational warrior taking up their cause against unfair and unreasonable academic behaviors, by the very institutional agents set to led them on their academic journeys. They have all earned their place
among their peers through demonstrating persistence, resilience, academic emphasis, self-efficacy beliefs, creating supportive and trusting relationships, and faith in their ability to achieve their academic goals, in other words—epitomizing academic optimism.

**Brooke: Going for Broke**

**Family profile.** Brooke is a 19-year-old African American college student who is attending a four-year university in southeastern Michigan. She has a younger sister who is sixteen and a high school sophomore. Brooke and her sister lived with their great-grandmother for most of their elementary school years attending an African-themed elementary charter school in the city. Brooke’s parents were frequent drug users and Brooke’s father was absent due to incarceration for several years. Brooke and her little sister eventually moved in with her mother after she married a man Brooke despised:

Like he has, I would say he’s bipolar. He don’t know how to talk to people. He treats people terribly. He had like cases against him, like child abuse and everything from his children. And like she, my mom won’t see the problem, like her kids being around the situation.

Brooke states that there was no reasoning with her mother about her “husband,” and this was just one of the contributing factors that caused them to have a troubled relationship with one another. Brooke, contemplating their relationship muses, “I don’t know it’s just like, probably from the lost years, it’s a lack of communication and a mix of bad attitudes.” One of the reasons Brooke suspects their relationship is so troubled is because her mother was very young when she had Brooke at just sixteen. Her mother had two children by the age of eighteen along with a lack of parental skills and frequent bouts with substance abuse. Brooke and her little sister went to
live with their “Nana” or great-grandmother when their parents could not provide a stable home for them.

Brooke moved back in with her mother after Nana moved to the state of Virginia (all of Brooke’s maternal relatives are originally from Virginia). Her freshman year of high school, Brooke was sent to live with her grandmother, not her great-grandmother, Nana. Brooke’s grandmother lived in close proximity to a high school her mother wanted her to attend. Feeling relieved not to have to deal with her stepfather, Brooke remembers doing well her freshman year of high school. The fact that she was more relaxed and at peace helped her to realize that being in a positive environment had a calming effect on her, and she attributes it to why she performed well academically her ninth grade year. Unfortunately, tenth grade was not as peaceful; Brooke was forced to move back in with her mother and stepfather, “like going back to be with her when it’s a place you don’t want to be you know, it just drains you.” Brooke says she “tried to stay out [of the house] as much as possible.” Brooke’s mother had a son with her stepfather, and Brooke often had to wake up in the mornings and get her sister and little brother ready for school to help her mother, who had to leave early in the morning to go to her construction job. Her mother’s willingness to allow her husband such close proximity to Brooke without demanding that he respect her, in Brooke’s opinion was a betrayal of trust and just another reason to believe her mother resented having her:

It was worst years before. So by tenth grade, like I said, I just started to accept things as they were. But, it would make me feel sometimes like I wasn’t, I felt like I was a mistake to her most of the time. And then, like she would take her anger out, like let him, like take her anger out, let him you know, the anger she had built up when he took it out on us, it was satisfactory to her.
Things began to go downhill really fast once Brooke returned to her mother’s house, “I would speak my opinion on things. Like if he talked to me a certain kinda way, I would tell him, ‘I’m not your child. You’re not gonna disrespect me.’” Brooke says her stepfather often replied, “You not grown,” and then a big fight would ensue. She recalls one time it got so bad, “they put me out the house.” Brooke, with a hurt look in her eyes, states, “He told me to leave and she [her mother] didn’t stop him. She helped me pack my things and move, so…” Brooke continues, “I was in eleventh grade the first time [they put her out]. The whole time Brooke was packing to leave her little sister was clinging on to her and saying, “If you leaving; I’m leaving. If you can go; I can go.” Brooke admits, “Neither one of us wanted to be there.”

Brooke’s tumultuous relationship with her stepfather was not her only trauma; her biological father traumatized Brooke as well. Brooke recalls, “He wasn’t around when I was growing up…so me being around, like I wouldn’t really want to be around him.” The last time she saw her father, “was like over the summer and people told me he was using drugs or something like that…because like now he’s schizophrenic.” After her father found out that she had a job and a car to get around in, he started coming around asking her for money and rides to different places, she refused:

Yeah, when I needed you; you weren’t there…you wasn’t around when I was growing up, so now that I’m grown up don’t try to come around…but, when I was younger, I couldn’t get a Merry Christmas, Happy Birthday, stuff like that, so…I’m not really affected in a bad way by it.

**Academic support.** Brooke credits her “Nana,” her great-grandmother, with whom she lived from kindergarten until sixth grade, with instilling in her a sense of priorities “school always came first.” After school Brooke’s other extracurricular activities were “dance and
cheerleading.” Brooke and her little sister, who also stayed with their Nana along with two
cousins and an aunt, always had to do any homework after school before they were able to watch
television, practice dance, cheerleading or go outside and play. Brooke, knowing now what it
takes to be a successful student, says she can really relate to her Nana’s words of wisdom
concerning their afterschool schedule, “even if we didn’t have homework, when you come home
you need to do something, you gotta read a book, read something out the newspaper, or you not
watching TV, you not going outside. Stuff like that.” Nana sent Brooke to an African-centered
charter school in Detroit, so she started “African dance classes in second grade and Pee Wee
Cheerleading in the third grade.” Her afterschool activities, by Brooke’s recollection, “just kept
me busy. I had a lot of fun. I got a lot out of it.” Recalling some of the highlights of performing
in her African dance troupe she states, “We performed for some of the most powerful people,
like from Africa. And then we traveled to like different states to perform for people.”

Brooke really enjoyed her time in elementary school and reflects on her Nana’s
attendance at her parent teacher conferences, “It showed that she cared and that it was important.”
Nana’s commitment to Brooke’s academic achievement was the main reason Brooke believed
she could get good grades “I was a 4.0 student all the way.” Brooke and her sister moved back in
with their mother when she was in sixth grade. Not only did Brooke’s grades go down, but also
she stopped participating in African dance, an extracurricular activity that kept her focused
academically, and that she really enjoyed.

Brooke shares that although her mother attended her parent teacher conferences, she was
not helpful when it came to her schoolwork “After leaving her [Nana] and going to my mom,
education wasn’t forced on me. If I didn’t want to go to school [Brooke speaking in her mother’s
voice], ‘You ain’t got to go to school.’” Brooke’s mom did not finish high school and eventually
earned her GED years later. Sensing that school wasn’t her mother’s top priority, Brooke usually confided in her eighth grade homeroom teacher about any subjects that she was having difficulty with or any problems that arose at home, describing her as “like having another mother figure.” The only subject Brooke really struggled with was math. As she explains, “I would say the teachers probably tried to help me, all of them. And, it’s not that I would do terribly bad. It was just good enough to pass.” Describing how her homeroom teacher would go the extra mile for her, Brooke recalls, “She would stay after school if I need it and like she saw something was wrong. She would pull me to the side. I, if basically if I needed anything she would help out.”

**College aspirations.** Although Brooke was disheartened by the lack of emotional support from her mother, her indifference fueled Brooke’s determination to surpass her academically and obtain a college degree. Brooke’s aspiration to complete high school and pursue her college degree stemmed from a long held goal “like from the earliest years, I knew I was going to college. I knew it was something I wanted to do.”

Brooke was so committed to doing well on the ACT test that she took it five times, admitting, “I was self-motivated and I didn’t want to end up like my mom or anybody else in my family, so I pushed myself hard enough to get to this point [going to college] So, it was kinda an easy decision.” Although her high school was small, Brooke felt like it was just the right size for her “It was a comfortable setting for me and I think it was best because it got me to start talking to people, start with [learning to] communication.” Brooke reveals that her biggest challenge since entering her high school besides math was her communication with everyone, even her teachers. Brooke left her high school her junior year based on rumors her mother heard that it was closing, and returned in twelfth grade after discovering that it had remained open and consequently, her graduating class was very small “it was only twenty-seven of us.”
Brooke’s Nana returned from Virginia for her high school graduation. And although Brooke knows for sure she made her Nana proud graduating, the thought that her mother may have been jealous of her accomplishments did enter Brooke’s mind, after all she was the first one in her family to go to college “and not be sitting at the house with like three or four babies.” Despite Brooke’s ability to successfully navigate the many pitfalls that stood in her path to post-secondary educational status, Brooke divulges her mother never told her “I’m happy you graduated. I’m happy you went to prom, I’m happy you in college, congratulations, good job,” Sadly, Brooke acknowledged, “I never got none of that.” Thankful and determined, Brooke avoided the family trap and enrolled in a four-year university against her mother’s strong advice.

Brooke handled the daunting task of deciding whether to attend a community college or four-year university on her own, and, although she felt the best course of action for her was to attend a four-year university, her mother, thought she was wasting her time and money attending a four-year university straight out of high school. Recalling her mother words, “I told you, you don’t need to be at a university. It’s a waste of money and it’s a waste of time going there.” Brooke is grateful she did not heed her mother’s advice and is currently attending a four-year university in southeastern Michigan and doing quite well academically. Leaving the comfort of a small high school after being among a close-knit group of high school students and in turn entering into a big university was something that Brooke had to adjust to, “coming to a university, you not use to being around all the people.” Brooke realized the poor communication between her and her mother contributed to the necessity to learn how to communicate effectively in general and is just one of the many challenges she has dealt with since entering college.

During her first semester of college, Brooke had to face the undeniable fact that she was failing her math course:
It was going terribly and a lot of people was saying “well since you can’t pass anyway, you might as well stop going. You might as well stop doing your homework.” But, I would still go to class every day. I would still do all my homework. Still take all the test, even though I knew at the end, that I was gonna fail.

Reflecting on the class and her efforts Brooke insists, “I didn’t fail this last semester math because I didn’t understand the material. It was the teacher...he would mark ridiculous things on my paper.” Brooke says when she would compare her paper to another students in the class and show him the answers were the same, he would reply, “Oh, well it was a mistake.” She says she even tried to get help from the “location where you go when you have teacher problems,” but she could never find it, and eventually she was dissuaded after several staff members informed her she waited too long to report the professor and drop the course. Although she struggled in her math course and failed, she was confident she would be able to overcome and do better next time she took it. She received all B’s and one A in her English class besides the snafu with her math professor.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** The biggest worry Brooke faced towards the end of her first year of college was finding a place to stay over the summer break. She did not want to return to her mother’s house. She also was considering community colleges because of the costs associated with staying at a four-year university. She had taken out several loans to pay for her first year of college. Brooke expresses her discomfort in taking out so many loans “I don’t like it at all. I do not like it. Like I looked for scholarships, but it seemed like every one I apply for, I don’t get.”

Another factor in her decision to consider community college was the lack of financial and emotional support from her family, especially her mother. The only true support she says she
received was from her Nana, whom she talked to frequently about college and life in general. Nana’s support gave Brooke her emotional and educational foundation “Sometimes when I’m sad about it, I have to think like well you’ve been doing it on your own, you got to keep doing it on your own.” Brooke and her mother’s relationship is severely strained right now. Brooke cites her mother’s lack of emotional and financial support as the reason for their conflict “I just feel like for some reason, she doesn’t want me not to succeed and that’s so weird for parents to want that, but that’s what it seems like.”

Brooke has managed to find a group of friends in school that offer her emotional support and “they’ll listen and give me good advice.” She appreciates their support because she rarely hears from her mother, little sister or brother. Speculating that if she “was to drop out of school or whatever…like I wouldn’t have to worry about her [mother] being sad about it or being mad. I don’t know, she just really wouldn’t care and I know that.” Regardless as to whether her mother and the rest of her family are interested in her academic success, Brooke says, “I know what I’m capable of doing. Like, I just won’t give up, so, like, I just got a goal set in my mind that I want to fulfill, that I want to reach.” And, Brooke is determined to accomplish her goal of obtaining her college degree. All of the struggles she has encountered; her mother’s indifference and lack of emotional and financial support, her absent father, her abusive stepfather, and her “Nana” moving away at a pivotal period in her life as well as a turbulent adolescence have all made her more determined to succeed in the pursuit of her academic goals and she is determined not to let anything or anyone get in her way as she aspires to become a physician.

**Mimi: A Need to Belong**

**Family profile.** Mimi and her two sisters, one younger and one older, along with their older brother, all lived with their great, grandparents “I really didn’t know where my
grandparents were.” Although Mimi’s father called her his “princess,” he was in and out of jail and could not provide a stable residence for her and her siblings. Her mother was “in and out of the house.” Mimi speculates, “drugs and alcohol was one of the [many] factors [she] wasn’t around.” Mimi, with a bewildered look in her eyes asks, “How could a mother not love their child [and not] want to be a better person... I forgive her now, but…it’s kind of hard because like she wasn’t a mother like how she was supposed to be.”

Many parents battle addictions that render them incapable of taking care of themselves let alone their children. Her parent’s addiction placed the burden of raising their four young children squarely on the shoulders of her mother’s grandparents, Mimi’s great grandparents. Mimi was six when she and her three siblings all went to live with their great grandparents. Mimi reflects on her time with her great grandparents, “It was okay. We lived in a two family flat house. …We only had three bedrooms...when I was younger it felt like a whole house, but once I got older…the house was pretty small, but we all lived there.”

Mimi and her siblings grew up and attended school on the west side of Detroit. They were fortunate to have her great grandparents as a safety net; otherwise they could have been placed in the foster care system. Tears silently stream down Mimi’s face as she relives the memories of those long ago days “I mean I love my [great] grandparents and I’m happy they raised me, but I know we’ve put them through so much.” Mimi, slight framed with delicate features, becomes overwhelmed with emotion, and her face is etched in pain as she contemplates the impact the burden of raising four children must have had on her great grandparents. She realizes the enormous effort it demanded from them, especially with their advanced age:

My great grandfather, he always woke us up. He took us to school. He always made sure we got there…they always made sure we had clothes for school, money for field
trips…They was retired so, I wish they could have just like enjoyed retirement and we could have visit them every now and then instead of how it was where they raised us.

Mimi reveals how their safe haven was shattered along with their sense of security after her great-grandmother became ill and died when she was 12 years old. The family court concluded that her great grandfather could no longer take care of four young children on his own. They were removed from her great grandfather’s custody and placed in the foster care system. Mimi remembers praying so hard for her mom to come to the juvenile home and rescue them from foster care “I mean me and my sister, we were like we couldn’t wait to go live back with her. I wanted her to change so bad. I could not understand why she just wouldn’t change or be better.” As Mimi reflects on her time in foster care she says, “It was so hard. I would have to miss school to go to court.” Eventually, the siblings were separated, Mimi and her younger sister went to live with a distant cousin, and they did not feel welcomed or wanted from the moment they entered her cousin’s house:

I think what happened was… me and my sister being in that predicament with my cousin and she was evil, it just made us so much closer. Once we got over there and we see what it was really like, we just knew we was all we had and we just stuck together.

Mimi’s schoolwork began to suffer after the move “I was hurting so bad, I couldn’t even do my work. I couldn’t get anything done,”

Although Mimi had finally started living with her mom she says, “Sometimes she’ll say something that’s really annoying.” Her mother often took credit for raising Mimi and would often begin a statement with, “I raised everybody….,” These words, even as Mimi repeats them, ignite her anger, and she throws her hands in the air as if to stop their meaning. Her anger rises as she addresses her mother’s claim, as if she is sitting there with us “No you didn’t, so don’t take
the credit when you didn’t do it because my great-grandmother raised me and my sisters and brother and how dare you try to take that credit from them!”

**Academic support.** Mimi describes how she has benefited from the kindness and support of some great teachers. The positive influence from Mimi’s interactions with teachers like Ms. Young, her kindergarten teacher, and her first grade teacher Mrs. Bond, who spent extra time every day with Mimi teaching her phonics from an “orange book,” has helped her to maintain her “love of learning.” School would become a nurturing space for Mimi to thrive and gather strength to endure the difficult and painful life situations she and her siblings would encounter growing up without their biological parents.

After the difficult move when Mimi and her sister went to live with the distant cousin where they felt unwanted, there was a silver lining in that dark cloud, as she met her mentor, Mr. Washington “I don’t remember how, but somehow we just clicked.” Mr. Washington worked as a project manager for one of the standardized student testing companies, and his main task was conducting student testing in some of the public schools in Detroit. Struggling with math at this time, Mimi recalls, “he would set me on there [the computer at her school], so I can do better on my math.”

Mimi’s school grades spiraled downward after moving in with her cousin “I didn’t care about my grades because my mom wasn’t coming, or my cousin wasn’t going to parent-teacher conference, so why care?” That’s why Mimi says her godmother’s decision to actually take the time to go up to her school and check on her academic progress touched her so deeply “She went once and that was pretty much it and that means a lot to me because my cousin didn’t go, my mother never went.” Mimi also credits her godmother with helping her to become a better writer “She was real active in our lives…she used to take us to her job and let us get on the computer
and do our work. And she helped me.” Mimi’s maternal grandmother eventually resurfaced. She bought a house in the suburb of Taylor, Michigan and began to visit Mimi and her sister at their cousin’s house. She also started coming to pick Mimi and her sister up for one night during the weekends, so that they could spend time with their other siblings. Although Mimi constantly wished her and her little sister could stay with their grandmother permanently because her cousin “wasn’t the nicest person,” she resigned herself to the fact that the decision about where she and her sister could live was completely out of her control.

Mimi began her freshman year of high school at one of the newly built high schools in the city. She decided to join her high school’s softball team. She was seeking an activity that would allow her to minimize the time she spent in her cousin’s house:

I played softball on the varsity softball team…and I think that was an outlet, like a way for me to just not be home and I could have fun and I had a team that I cared about and they cared about me, and I had a coach who cared about me also...there’s something about playing softball, when I stepped on a field, I could have gotten into a fight with my cousin earlier that day, but once I got on that field, I didn’t remember nothing. But, I think the worst part about that was when I stepped off the field; it’s when reality hit me again. But, I guess for those two hours…

Playing on her high school’s softball team was cathartic for Mimi and she was always excited to play away games, which gave her a valid reason to be away from her cousin’s house. One day on a field trip for a softball game to an opposing team’s high school she describes her experience:

Walking up the stairs and they [the high school] had these glasses, like these little blocks of glass and they were broke…you could see outside…you could feel the air coming
through…That’s not what my high school that I went to look like, so it was just like a wake-up call, like you kind of got it good where you are at!

Although Mimi’s high school was a place she longed to be, living with her cousin was something she yearned to escape. During that time Mimi’s softball coaches were lifesavers:

She [one of her coaches] was a White lady...she was really helpful to me. I didn’t tell her a lot, but I told her a little bit and she would do extra things for me, taking me home because my cousin, she never wanted to pick us up. I always had to take the bus even if it was dark at night, it could be raining or snowing, she won’t come pick me up. So, she would take me home from practice and my other coach, he would buy me food and he would also pick me up.

**College aspirations.** Mimi acknowledges that she has met “so many great people along the way” of her educational journey. From the moment she entered high school, Mr. Washington started talking to her about college. She mimics his words in a deep “Okay, you need to start thinking about college.” And that’s just what she said she did. Mr. Washington, being a true mentor, started helping Mimi look at colleges and explaining to her what she needed to do to get accepted into a four-year university “He set me up on this website that would help me find schools that matched my personality and my interests and stuff like that.” Once Mimi really begin to envision attending college:

I started caring about my grades, probably my eleventh or twelfth grade year when I knew I needed money for college and I was submitting my college applications, but I wasn’t getting a lot of money because my grades were really low.

Moving out of her cousin’s house when she was seventeen was the motivation that helped her work hard to bring her grades back up, “I had C’s and B’s, like I barely had an A, but once I
left my cousin’s house, I had A’s and B’s.” Mimi and her little sister were finally able to escape their cousin’s hostile environment after their mother moved in with her boyfriend and was able to provide a home for them. Around the same time, Mimi’s father was released from prison and also obtained his own residence “I left and went to go live with my dad and then I was in between my father’s house and my mother’s house.” Through all the family upheaval Mimi is proud that she has managed to graduate from high school despite all the obstacles she encountered and credits “the people like my coaches, pretty much people around her,” as being the motivating influence that helped her to keep pressing forward academically and emotionally so that she could attend college.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** As Mimi’s relationship with her grandmother grew stronger, she thanked her grandmother for helping her to stay focused throughout all that she and her siblings have been through “My grandmother often reminds me, you are strong.” Mimi agrees, “I think I proved that I was strong…I’m stronger than what I really thought I was.” Her grandmother acknowledged she abandoned Mimi’s mother and admitted, “I wasn’t a good mother, but I’m a good grandmother.” Mimi’s grandmother’s confession and her willingness to admit that she failed her daughter is the catalyst that really brought them closer and has allowed Mimi to forgive her and love her unconditionally as she states, “I feel appreciative to have her. Not everyone has a grandmother.”

Having the support of her grandmother, Mr. Washington, her teachers and coaches inspired her to pursue her goal of becoming a medical doctor, “I have never really seen a Black doctor. I never met a Black doctor. I don’t see them. All the time, my doctor is White.” She says she has become timid about responding to people’s questions about what she wants to do as she enters college because they usually say, “Oh, you’re going to be a nurse.” When she tells people
she wants to be a doctor, they look at her like she said, “I just seen a ghost… like she’s crazy… It’s so hard because of the world we live in…because of that stereotype.”

Mimi reflects on all of her experiences along her long journey towards attending a four-year college. Mimi currently has a 4.0 grade point average and is attending a four-year university in southeastern Michigan. She goes to her mother’s house on her college breaks however Mimi still feels unwanted by her mom and does not exactly know why, “I don’t think she’s jealous or anything because she’s always talking about how she’s proud of me,” but their relationship is somewhat strained and Mimi and her mother struggle to maintain a cordial relationship. Mimi also is reminded of her struggles in high school when she is informed of her little sister’s poor grades “I’ve been really trying to push her to just do better because she can.” While Mimi has encountered challenges in her coursework, she views those as mere bumps in the road and displays an overriding sense of resilience and academic optimism. Achieving her goal of attending a four-year university has inspired Mimi to work hard to achieve her goal of becoming a doctor.

Lisa: She Not Crazy, She my Momma

**Family profile.** Lisa, fashionably dressed with long shoulder length hair, is the epitome of cool and collected. She has three siblings, two older sisters, 37 and 33 and a 14-year-old brother. Her mother is a single mother struggling with mental health issues, which consistently interrupts the rhythm of their family’s daily life. Lisa’s father left the family after years of trying to manage her mother’s mental instability. Lisa is now charged with the task of caring for her mother and her little brother. Lisa’s little brother’s father is not in the picture and she worries about him not having a male role model to look up. Her own father has a relationship only with her and is not inclusive of her other siblings. Although Lisa’s mother struggles with mental
health issues, she is the more financially stable member of her immediate family. Lisa’s mother is the only one of her siblings to own her own home and Lisa is grateful to her mother for providing a home throughout her childhood. She was aware of the transient nature of the lives of her other schoolmates and was appreciative of her mother’s determination to provide a consistent home to live in. Her mother’s financial stability is even more respected when considering her ongoing battle with mental health issues. Lisa struggles with the burden of monitoring her mother’s mental stability but is determined to take care of her mother and keep her from medical placement in a mental health institution.

**Academic support.** School has always been a refuge for Lisa and she “has always excelled.” Lisa ponders where she got her academic aspirations:

I never understood because me coming from a family, my mother only, she didn’t go to high school. She only went to middle school. My father graduated high school. I’m the first one out of my mother’s four kids to go college…but I always had that motivation when I was younger.

The preschool in Detroit where her mother placed Lisa was not up to Lisa’s young expectations, and she remembers calling her father and emphatically declaring, “I don’t want to go to this school. I want to go to a real school. I want to go to a big kid’s school.” Lisa’s dad lived in a suburb outside of Detroit and after she requested to be in a “real school,” he registered her in his school district, which Lisa attended from kindergarten throughout high school. The class structure was different in the suburban school district Lisa attended, “Our classes were set up when we were in middle school, we had this thing like you have open and closed classes. Open classes were basically like equivalent to like AP.” Although, Lisa really wanted to be in open classes, she was afraid that she would become overwhelmed and not be prepared to handle
the additional workload. During her freshman year of high school, she would discuss the assignments and the books that were required with her friend who attended open classes and she began to realize that she could handle the added responsibility that came along with being in an open class. She told herself, “sophomore year, I would never let my schedule be completely equal level classes…if they could do it, I could do it too.” Lisa started taking honors history classes, honors science classes and then, in her junior year of high school, she took AP English, AP Literature and AP Language “I had a liking for history. It was just I learn more on things I could connect, so if this happened to someone and this was something that happened in life, how is that affecting me.”

Lisa’s face brightens when she talks about her love for learning, “I liked going to school. I liked to learn new things,” and her enthusiasm was evident in her schoolwork and noticed by the teachers in her high school: “I remember I just had teachers that would recommend me for stuff. I had teachers that knew who I was that I didn’t have.” She took her schoolwork very seriously “I’ve never been the kid who be late on assignments.”

Lisa’s participation in sports provided unexpected benefits. Soon, her basketball team became like her second family where “coaches felt like parents” and she describes the support from her team “You got your teammates you go to class with, and then you have people that they might be in your class and now you got somebody you can study with.” Lisa’s family never attended any of her basketball games, nor watched her play in the band or sing in the school’s choir “none of my parents were motivating me, when I was in the band…my father wasn’t coming to my concerts. My senior night of basketball, my parents didn’t come. My senior night of softball, my parents didn’t come.” Their lack of support made her realize, “I got to do this for myself… if you don’t want to be here with me then I’m going to do it regardless.”
One day, Lisa’s mom tried to take that all away from her “You can’t play basketball anymore, I won’t come and get you from practice.” Lisa had no intention of quitting the team “Why would I take something out of my life that was getting me out of this at least for a little bit? Why would I end doing something like that?” Lisa found herself confiding in one of the team parents about her mom and the ultimatum she had been given. The team parent stated, “Well if I have to drop you off, I have to drop you off. If you got to stay at my house and just go from my house to school.” Grateful for the support from the team parent, Lisa was motivated to continue playing softball because she saw firsthand how the same ultimatum had wreaked havoc in her older sister’s life “My sister was running track and my mom was like, well you can’t run track anymore. I’m not going to allow you and when you get out of school, you come straight home.” Her mother’s actions were completely unreasonable, and Lisa speculated that maybe because she never got the opportunity to do any extracurricular school activities like Lisa and her sisters, that she harbored some jealousy and resentment towards them. Lisa watched as her sister lost her motivation and “all her energy she was putting out in track… went away and then she stop going to classes. She stop going to school.” Lisa’s sister would later have her first baby at fourteen.

Determined not to allow her mother to control her in the same manner and take away an activity that was positive and helped her stay focused academically, she discloses: “I continued to do it… I could be doing a whole lot of other things…and I had friends that were into all types of things that they shouldn’t have been into and I didn’t want to [fall into that]” That was not the first time Lisa had to stand up to her mom as she confides, “I remember when I was seventeen, out of nowhere my mom says to me, ‘Oh you think you so grown, you think you so much better than somebody, you can get out my house.’” She resolved not to show the hurt
and pain her mother’s words caused her and calmly walked over to the phone and called her dad to pick her up. Lisa is accustomed to hiding her feelings and emotions “When my mom’s sick, she feeds off your hurting, you hurting it makes her feel powerful. She’s one of the most manipulative people I’ve ever met in my life.” Lisa’s older sisters have always warned her not to show any emotion around their mom when she’s “sick,” “like, since I was little my sisters told me like, you can’t cry. Crying is not what we do. You can’t cry.”

Lisa’s senior year was a really stressful time in her young life as Lisa attests, “My senior year was my roughest year and I didn’t have anybody to turn to.” It all began to unravel when her mother showed up unannounced and unwelcomed at her high school. Lisa recalls being summoned to Ms. Sparks, the high school principal’s office. She had recently shared with her principal some of the difficult issues she was facing in her home life, and she instantly realized something was wrong when her principal did not greet her as she entered her office. Instead she immediately divulged to Lisa, “Well your mom wants to see you and I know you don’t want to see her, but what do you want me to tell her?” Flippantly, Lisa responded, “I don’t know what to tell her, just tell her to go away and if she comes back, call the police.” Ms. Sparks, attempting to downplay the situation stated, “I’m not gonna call the police unless it gets dangerous. I don’t want to put your mother in that position.” Thirty minutes later, Ms. Sparks was forced to do just that after Lisa’s mom came back up to the high school threatening to hit Ms. Sparks if she did not bring her daughter [Lisa] to the office immediately.

From a distance, Lisa watched as her mother was escorted from the school in handcuffs by the police and immediately regretted her remark to Ms. Sparks. Lisa has spent most of her life trying to keep her mother’s mental illness a secret:
When you tell people about, when you mention a sensitive topic like mental disorder, people automatically think to the worst stuff, so I can’t even tell you about who she [her mom] is ‘cause you already got it in your mind that she’s somebody else. I can’t tell that to teachers because you’ll have a parent-teacher conference; they talking to her like she a child…so, I just never wanted my teachers to look at her different. I never wanted my principals to look at her different, so I would always keep it to myself.

After witnessing her mother’s arrest, Lisa questioned her decision to share her mom’s condition with her high school principal. Lisa would have to deal with her mother’s mental illness as an adult having turned eighteen a couple of weeks before her mom’s arrest at her high school. She called her older sisters to help her. So, here was the moment that she always knew was coming:

My whole life, I knew my mother had bipolar and schizophrenia, but I never had to deal with it directly on my own. So, my senior year, it was basically like the test. It was my time to deal with it because I felt like my sisters understood, but they didn’t live with her. I thought it affected me and my brother directly, so I wanted to make sure everything was taken care of in a proper way…and when I took on that responsibility, it was just so much to deal with.

Lisa and her sister rushed downtown to the county building to get the paperwork started for the transfer of their mom from the police station to the hospital and for guardianship status. During the subsequent court hearing, the psychologist suggested Lisa’s mom be held for sixty to ninety days in a mental facility. That ordeal scarred Lisa for life “They had my mom’s hands chained to her feet.” Although Lisa realized that her mom needed help, “she had done so much. She had messed up her car. She was randomly leaving her car places. She had cut her hair off…it
CROSSING JORDAN

was sad.” And, even though Lisa knew her mom was out of control, she found it extremely hard to see her mother in that type of condition, chained up like a wild animal.

Becoming the head of the household while her mom was in the mental hospital forced Lisa to take on the responsibility of caring for her little brother. Lisa’s unfamiliarity with running a household often caused her to struggle with paying the family’s household bills “I had to pay the lights, DTE…Comcast was asking for all kind of money. My mom was telling me only put $100.00 on there, they was telling me they was going to cut it off, I was so scared.”

Another dilemma Lisa faced was transportation; her school was on the outskirts of Detroit and her brother’s school was on the east side of Detroit:

We didn’t have no car…I had to make sure I went to school. Then when I got out of school I made my dad take me back to the house, so I could be there when he [her little brother] got home.

During her mother’s crisis, Lisa was faced with another dilemma; either she could confide in her AP English teacher everything that was going on with her mother, or she would receive a lower grade in her class:

I had a six page paper due. I couldn’t go to the library. I didn’t have no laptop and I didn’t have no way to type it and I was scared. So, I finally went to my teacher and I asked her, “Can you just put me in the regular class because right now I have an A, but if I miss this paper, I got, I’m gon have, it’s gon be low.”

Lisa routinely hid her mom’s mental illness from others, and opening up to her teacher about her mom’s illness was difficult, but she recalls, after communicating her predicament to her teacher, her teacher’s caring response to her problem was something that resides with her to this day. Lisa, in a gesture to empathize her teacher’s heartfelt reply, places her hand over her
heart and recites her teacher’s sincere response “If I can’t get a hold of a laptop for you to work on, you can write your paper out by hand, and I’m going to read it, but I’m not gonna put you in a regular class.” Lisa felt such a sense of relief that she immediately knew telling her teacher about her mother’s mental illness was the right decision to make. Lisa’s AP teacher’s support helped her to continue to succeed academically in her AP class.

During that period in her life, her teacher and coaches became central support figures in her life. Lisa describes how she would ask her teachers questions about their education and what motivated them because they were the only people around her that she felt were achieving their goals “I had never seen anyone from where I was doing anything positive…nobody was motivating nobody around there, and then the people that were trying to motivate nobody would listen to.”

Despite shouldering adult responsibilities and coping with enormous stress, Lisa’s determination to succeed academically never wavered “I’m always on my stuff. I’m always scared… I’m that kid that’s a step ahead of the class all the time.” Her drive to succeed was based on resilient aspirations to leave the kind of life she had endured and take a different path:

It stop being, oh I want to go to college, [It became] I got to go to college now because if I don’t go to college, I’m going to be stuck here probably working a minimum wage job living on somebody’s floor or something.

The determination to make something of herself, despite the lack of support she received from her parents, is remarkable. While many children would use their parents’ low expectations as an excuse not to perform well academically, Lisa uses it as an incentive to push harder:

The low expectations my mom set for me, I realized… just because somebody set this goal low. I don’t want to settle for this low goal…I never had anyone telling me, you
have to do this, you should do this. Your life would be better doing this…like once I graduated from high school nobody cared what I did. I could do what I wanted. I come into the house be out as long as I wanted, nobody cared because I’m the first one to get a diploma.

Lisa’s father even tried to talk her out of going to college “You should just go to a trade school and pick up a trade so you can get a job fresh out, you not gonna get no job going straight to college.” She could have let her father’s words dissuade her from going to college, but she recalls going to church with her mother and watching some of the church members that were heading to college receive scholarships from the church and rationalized, “If they can do this, I can do this.”

**College aspirations.** From a young age, Lisa was always determined to go to college “I already had it set in my mind. At first when I was younger, I didn’t know what I wanted to be, but I knew I wanted to go to college.” At first, Lisa felt that she needed to attend a college close to home, so she could commute and look after her mother and her brother. Her real concern with leaving her mother and little brother alone was if she attended a college outside the city, who would keep them stable? The tipping point that pushed her towards going away to a four-year university was her principal’s admission that she experienced a similar situation with her mother, not a mental illness, but a disease that affected her mother’s mental state—Alzheimer’s. Right before Lisa’s high school graduation, Ms. Sparks convened an impromptu conference with Lisa, and she began to share her own struggle dealing with her mother’s disease and the toll it took on her. After listening to Ms. Sparks, Lisa could sympathize with her story, especially her feelings of being overwhelmed by her mother’s illness. Lisa recalls Ms. Sparks’ parting advice, “You need to go off to school because if you don’t you gon let her life become your life and it’s going
to make you bitter.” Considering Ms. Sparks’ advice, Lisa began to see the wisdom of going away to college and the importance of improving her grades, if she wanted any chance of obtaining any academic scholarships for college:

I was going into my senior year with a 2.7 and I said, I’m not graduating with no two point nothing because that’s average. I’ve got to least graduate with a 3.0. I got my 2.7 to a 3.1 when I graduated…I would never let myself get anything under a C. I can’t get anything under a C plus. It hurts my pride…I set certain goals.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** Playing basketball and softball in high school helped Lisa focus “Sports, it always something that motivates you… there’s always something that motivates you and then when you have other people that have these same goals, or set these same goals, you’ll never feel alone in it.” That motivation helped Lisa apply and get accepted to a four-year university in southeastern Michigan about an hour drive away from her family:

I know I made the right decision and…I know if it came down to it, I have good friends up here that I have met, if it came down to it and I had to go to the city, I could have a way there, so I feel like it’s a better place and I have my space and they have their space, but I make sure I go home.

Lisa went home sooner than she thought when a girl who lives down the street from her mother called her, during the second week in college, to say that her mother was losing control once again. Lisa recalls the frantic phone call she received, “Your momm just tried to run my daddy off the road. Your momma just tried to kill my daddy.”

It was the weekend and I came down [and got] the police, I could get the police to transfer her [to a psychiatric hospital], but I would have to open the door. They wouldn’t knock on the door. I would have to unlock the door and I’m the only one with a key to
my momma’s house. So, I had to come, we riding past my momma’s house, we can’t find her… She finally went into the house. I unlocked the door [and] they [the police] transferred her and people don’t realize and like that’s something I kept to myself, but now that I’m in college I can speak openly about it.

College was becoming an outlet for Lisa to finally be able to talk about her struggles with her mom’s mental illness without judgment or repercussions. Lisa states emphatically, “I came here [to college] with this goal [graduating]. Nobody going to achieve this goal for me, nobody going to do it for me, so I got to do it on my own.” Determination and resilience are at the epicenter of all the chaos Lisa has navigated to pursue her educational goal of becoming a college graduate. Despite the lack of parental support and encouragement, Lisa has aimed her own academic compass towards her high academic goals. Her persistence is evident in her need to manage her mother’s mental illness, while pursuing her own academic aspirations. Lisa’s teachers and coaches become her greatest supporters as they uncovered her tenacity and self-efficacy skills in her daily academic life.

**Olivia: Can Somebody Help Me; I’m Out Here on my Own**

**Family profile.** Olivia has been taking care of herself since she was 14 years old. She is the second oldest of seven children, born to a woman who struggled in her role as a mother and eventually failed at motherhood resulting in all of her children being dispersed like human leaves in a strong, unyielding wind their lives uprooted and changed forever by the broken roots of their mother’s spirit. What effects do women who are emotionally, sexually, and physically abused in relationships suffer? What happens to the innocent and vulnerable children borne as a result of these dating disasters? This is the story of Olivia, an 18-year-old, low-income African American
college student, a child of a woman who has experienced too many unhappy endings to summon the strength of character to be a mother, even though she is one seven times over.

Olivia’s story is hard to imagine let alone live, yet she does it with such grace and strength that her story is inspirational as well as harrowing. Olivia was only five or six years old when she understood that her mom was “not being a good role model to us.” Olivia recalls being exposed to the act of sex at that young, tender age “I understood and knew what she was doing and I knew that she shouldn’t have been doing that in front of us.” To this day, she is traumatized by the acts she witnessed her mother do with men, “like you just mess me up in my head all the way and then she would be doing stupid stuff in the same bed with us.” Her respect for her mother went downhill from that point on, but she insists, “I still loved her. I didn’t understand everything, but she was a good mom you know” Olivia’s mother sent her and her siblings to school every day. And the best part of attending elementary school for Olivia “was like gym and stuff.” Even when she was sick, Olivia would beg to go to school:

It was nothing to do there [at home]. I had friends there [at school], I learned, I’d eat, you know, so that was a big part; food, the food, because we didn’t really have much growing up, so when you would go to school you know, you eat.

Olivia concedes that things weren’t always dysfunctional, at least in her mind “my eight grade year, that’s when she [her mother] started like going through stuff with men basically.” She continues, “they were bringing her down and she wasn’t seeing her self-worth as a woman.”

Olivia realized that her mother was a single parent of seven children and there were a lot of demands on her time. She describes what happened when her mother experienced a break-up that shattered her:
You’re suppose to be our role model. You’re suppose to teach us…and we didn’t get that.

We got, oh yeah, he broke up with you so cry, do drugs. That’ll help you through…She hit rock at some point and that’s when we all hit rock bottom.

Olivia says it was around eighth grade when the bottom started to fall out of her world. The family was forced to move into a house that did not have hot water, a working furnace, stove, or refrigerator. The horrific living conditions continued for months and she entered high school a former shell of the student she once was. They survived on sheer will “Me and my sister had jobs. My big sister worked at the YMCA, the childcare center. I worked at the Chinese food place; I could bring food home. She could bring the money and buy stuff that we needed.” While Olivia, and her sister were struggling to keep their younger siblings fed, Olivia’s mother was staying with one of her many boyfriends, cooking him breakfast every morning, while they scrambled to feed their little brothers and sisters without a stove or hot water “she came home in the morning time sometimes because we would like, be like, ‘Could you make us some breakfast over there and bring it over here?’” After too many times of her mother leaving her and her sister to fend for themselves, Olivia would call her mother’s boyfriend and shrewdly ask, “We’re hungry. Can you please buy us some food or get us some food?” However, Olivia’s audacity to contact her mother’s boyfriend would land her in hot water with her mother, but she would retort, “They crying to me because they’re hungry…what are you doing? You’re the mom, you know!”

Olivia describes how “We didn’t have anything…I was depressed, feeling dirty going to school.” Eventually, a counselor noticed the change in Olivia’s demeanor and asked her if everything was okay. Olivia informed her of her home situation and the counselor contacted Child Protective Services (CPS) on behalf of Olivia and her siblings. Olivia’s mother wrongfully blamed Olivia’s boyfriend’s mother, who Olivia insists, “was very nice to me” for reporting her
to CPS. Olivia confessed that she confided in her high school counselor and her counselor was duty bound to report the living conditions they were suffering. Her mother responded to her confession by calling Olivia a traitor and backstabber and putting her out of the home. Consequently, she went to live with her boyfriend and his family and continued her freshman year of high school in a stable home environment.

After living with her boyfriend’s family for three of her high school years, Olivia returned home but once again, her mother kicked her out of the house. The second time she was put out of the house stemmed from her needing bus fare to school and asking her mother for the money. Instead of giving Olivia the money to go to school, her mother gave her a $5.00 winning lottery ticket to cash in at the corner store. After she returned home with the five dollars and her mother only gave her bus fare, which was $3.40. Olivia asked for the remaining money from the lottery ticket, a mere $1.60 to get lunch and her mother refused as she pulled out hundred and fifty dollar bills. Olivia asked her mother, “How are I suppose to eat?” In which case her mother replied, “I need this money for something else.” Olivia became furious and told her mother, “Here, you can just take it, I’ll walk to school.” Her mother kicked her out and called her “bitches and hoes and stuff like that.” At this point, Olivia said, “I don’t see you as a mom because moms don’t do that.” Walking away from the confrontation with her mother, she recalls, “It made me feel worthless, like she just didn’t love me anymore, or never, to be honest.”

After a succession of conflicts with her mother and becoming homeless with nowhere to stay, Olivia move in with her sister and then her father, “I basically demanded that I live with him. I never asked him. I’m just like, ‘Okay my mom kicked me out, I’m coming to live with you.’” Olivia says her dad was initially gracious and even gave her the only bedroom and slept in the living room on the sofa. Everything was good between them for a couple of months, “I had
hot water and heat and stuff like that my mom wasn’t offering that, well, she couldn’t, it was a step up from where I was living.” However, Olivia states, after two months things “didn’t really go too well,” and she moved out and started living with her new boyfriend and his family.

Olivia is grateful to her boyfriend’s parents who allowed her to stay with them after leaving her father’s home and states, “they treat me like I’m their daughter.” She says for the first time in a long time she feels “loved.” Sadly, Olivia’s own parents show her anything but love. Recently, Olivia’s father called her while she was at work and she went into the restroom to talk with him. Hurt and confused, she discovered that he called her by accident; he was really trying to call one of his friends. She relates:

That made me feel like a piece of crap because, like we rarely talk and, like, he doesn’t check up on me, he doesn’t see how I’m feeling, how I’m doing, or, you know, he’s just not there and when he made a mistake and called me, I’m just like, okay, like just get out my life, you know.

**Academic support.** School was a place where Olivia gained her self-confidence through a trusting relationship with one of her teachers, Mrs. Parish “I think it was my sixth grade year…she was just this old lady, who just was like so gentle and kind and she would motivate me.” Mrs. Parish’s encouraging words still echo in Olivia’s head “Oh, you can do it…don’t say you can’t.” All of Mrs. Parish’s encouragement was aimed at helping her to conquer her struggles with math, the only subject she really had to work hard at. Her newfound confidence gained from Mrs. Parish’s tutoring and encouragement helped her pass her math class and “that’s when I really started getting good grades because…I noticed that I was never really good at math—my first bad grade I got…like in fifth grade and I got a D in math,” so experiencing her triumph over math helped increase her academic confidence. She recalls, “I always got laughed
at, but I was trying to get it done, you know, do it right.” “When she [Mrs. Parish] told me, ‘You can do it.’ I’m like ‘okay’ I found that confidence in myself and I started doing better.”

At the beginning of the school year, her mother would attend parent teacher conferences, but after hearing how well she was doing, her mother would assume that there was no real need to continue to do so. Olivia became disheartened because she practically had to beg her mother to go to her parent teacher conferences. She explains why it was important for her mother to come and support her:

I’m doing my best and these are the benefits, you know. I want her to be proud of me; that’s what I wanted her to come for…and actually in school during parent teacher conference, they tell you like, if your parent comes, then they give you extra credit or something like that.

A family friend that she met through her church introduced Olivia to her high school “I met her in church, well, I met her in eighth grade. She knew my little sisters from a program they called Tutoring Tree, and she introduced me to the school.” Olivia really loved her high school and was so grateful to Sue, who found it for her. She was an older White lady who held very strong Christian beliefs and would eventually become a great friend to Olivia. The high school was technology and science based, so Olivia felt she really benefited from attending it because her goal is to one day become an obstetrician. Olivia stayed focused on her academic goals despite her mother’s harsh treatment. She continued to stay engaged with afterschool activities. Olivia participated in cheerleading, dabbled in basketball “I tried basketball—did not like it,” and soccer. Soccer was by far her favorite sport, although she did not start playing until her senior year of high school. Participating in extracurricular activities encouraged Olivia to keep up her high grades:
I graduated high school with a 3.8 and knowing that I had to keep a certain grade point average and grade in my class to continue on the soccer team, it motivated me to actually keep doing good in my classes.

**College aspirations.** Olivia had big plans for her future that were actually formulated in high school:

In high school we have career day and well a women came in and she was talking about how she has a major in biology and with that biology major, she either wanted to be a dentist, or an obstetrician, and I asked her, like you know not to sound dumb or anything, but what’s a obstetrician? She said, “That’s a doctor that delivers babies,” and I’m like, “Oh, you know, that sounds really nice. I mean I think maybe if I’m not scared of blood, you know, that I can do it.” I went on a few internships: I saw twins being delivered and I really liked, the idea of it.

One requirement of the high school was that students participate in a study-abroad for one week. Olivia, with Sue’s financial help and her own fundraising efforts, traveled abroad to Italy and Greece. Her mother did not contribute in any way to her going on her high school adventure.

Olivia prized her education and was determined to pursue her educational aspirations even though her mother accused Olivia of “using big words,” telling her to stop acting so uppity. Olivia assigns her mother’s resentment and harsh words to the fact that she is now usurping her academically because she only completed the eleventh grade. She recalls her mother saying to her and her siblings, “I want y’all to get further than I did.” Yet, Olivia says she has felt her mother’s resentment ever since she did just that, “I feel like when I did start passing her up, she just started resenting us.” Her mother’s resentment of Olivia’s academic success was evident, but
it was countered by her aunt’s admiration of her academic accomplishments and her determination to complete her high school education, and to continue on to a four-year university.

Her aunt recalls:

I watched y’all go through everything y’all went through and, you know, you still did it, you came out strong and you know, despite everything you went through – your mom being mean to you, you got put out more than once.

**Pivotal moment/turning point.** After high school graduation, Olivia enrolled in a four-year university in southeastern Michigan “When I first moved in, the first day, I barely came with anything, you know. I had the clothes on my back, I had a few other clothes.” Sue the family friend, who was always there in a pinch bought her “soap, mouthwash and toothpaste.” Olivia becomes emotional as she states, “she’s helping me through college.” Olivia also credits her boyfriend’s family with helping her to maintain her daily needs and provide the necessities, “they give me money for laundry, they give me money whatever. You know, I need this, whatever you need, you need money for food, there you go. They’re good people and I’m their son’s girlfriend.” In contrast, right after Olivia arrived at the university, she came down with a virus and called home to ask her mother to send her the $30.00 she needed to go to the university’s clinic. Her mother repeatedly said she had sent the money in the mail, and after waiting for several days, Olivia’s sister finally broke the news that their mother was lying to Olivia, she had not sent her the money to go to the clinic. Olivia was furious with her mother:

She has a job at McDonald’s, but she was working a lot and getting a lot and I don’t think that $30 is a lot, seeing as though you didn’t take care of me since I was 14-years-old. I’ve been on my own since I was fourteen, so why can’t you give me $30? You know, I give you money when I don’t have it, my last. And, I helped take care of the household, I
paid bills and made sure we was straight, you know and I can’t get $30—I’m sick, you know!

After surviving another emotional betrayal by her mother, Olivia vowed to leave her in the past, but those familial ties are hard to break:

One day out of the blue, she called me and she was like, ‘I love you.’ I’m like, “I love you too, mom,” and that was that you know. We hung up and never spoke again until she asked for money.

Right after Olivia received her income tax refund, her mother called her up asking to borrow three hundred dollars. Olivia said she listened to her mother’s appeal for money, but reminded her of how she needed her to help her when she was sick by sending her the $30, but she did not and so she told her mother that she could not help her. She informed her mother, that at this point, she needed to try to help herself “I just got a job that I’m barely making it with and you want to take from me.”

Olivia’s strength of character came in handy when she encountered a math professor whom she considers to be prejudiced against African American students “he docks points for every little thing…he would not assist me, he would not do anything.” Once, while she was at the math lab for tutoring, she inquired about speaking to someone who was over her professor in the math department. She was given the name of a woman who was a dean in the math department and she went to talk to her. Olivia explained to the dean that she was working really hard in her math class and the professor was taking points off of her paper for stupid things, which was causing her grade to go down. When the math dean confronted the professor, he made excuses for marking down Olivia’s paper by saying he could not read her handwriting. The dean began to personally tutor Olivia and warned the professor to be fair, admonishing him by saying,
“You can’t do this girl like this, why are you doing this?” After the dean confronted him, Olivia says, he began to ease up on his harsh grading of her. However, once she was made aware that she had the right to file a grievance against him for his mistreatment of her in his class, she did so, “I feel good that I was telling on him, but I felt like nothing was being done as a result.”

Olivia’s determination to make it against all odds has been remarkable; her godmother understood well the dilemma Olivia faced trying to overcome the pain her mother had caused her throughout her young life while still trying to accomplish her goal of becoming a doctor. She calls Olivia often to encourage her through her educational journey “I love you, so just know that, whatever you do, know that you do have a support system outside of your mom, you know just keep on going and don’t pay her no attention.” And, Olivia hates to admit it, but, “I really let her get to me because she’s my mother like she birthed me and that relationship that we have to each other, it does affect me.” Olivia’s godmother tries to help Olivia understand that even though that’s her mother, sometimes a person can be toxic and you have to distance yourself from them “You know, I see how you feel about your mother, I know you love her, but it’s just some people who was made to stop you and she was one of them.”

Olivia is committed to obtaining her college degree and going to medical school. During our first interview, Olivia’s challenge was a financial one “I don’t think I’m going to be able to pay for this semester, but I’m trying. Even if I have to take out a loan, I’m going to do it because I need to stay in school.” During her first semester at the university, Olivia worked forty hours a week to try to make enough money to pay off her tuition bill and fell short by 600 dollars at the end of the semester. She says she was exhausted trying to work, study, and go to her classes. Faced with an overdue tuition bill and the possibility of not being able to register for classes, she announced during our second interview that she had the idea to create a Go Fund Me page to try
to raise her tuition money. She titled her page, *Breaking the Cycle* and received enough money to pay off her tuition bill and register for her winter semester of classes. Olivia’s persistence and resilience have helped her to advance towards her goal of attending medical school. Now, at the end of her first year of college, Olivia’s academic focus is strong and Olivia is determined to overcome her life’s obstacles and achieve her academic goals.

**Conclusion/Summary**

The stories of Brooke, Mimi, Lisa, and Olivia demonstrate remarkable resilience and persistence in the face of overwhelming childhood challenges. Their dysfunctional parents, abandonment, the parenting of their own mothers, the abuse, all flow through their life histories like molasses down a tree trunk, slow and draining, but attached to a root of reality that many African American children are living daily; a slow and methodical march to the bottom of our social welfare systems with no social safety nets in place to catch them as they land haphazardly among defunct social welfare programs. Through the many obstacles and barriers they have encountered, Brooke, Lisa, Mimi, and Olivia demonstrate resilience and sheer determination to make something of themselves and improve their life circumstances no matter what the financial, emotional, and spiritual costs.

Each of the young women has an urgent need for more financial assistance. They acknowledge people and relationships that have sustained them and allowed them to continue their educational journeys, while identifying barriers that they have faced and conquered or are still fighting through. Their belief in their ability to obtain their college degrees is palpable and stems from constantly braving difficult life circumstances and emerging with a renewed commitment to becoming someone other than who they know, becoming the dream of who they hope to be. Their commitment to their education is strong and unyielding, demonstrating
academic optimism that began in their earliest school years. Teachers, counselors, school administrators, mentors, coaches, and caring adults have entered the lives of all the study’s participants at pivotal moments changing their academic and life trajectories in meaningful and optimistic ways.

Brooke, Lisa, Mimi, and Olivia have all benefited from participating in extracurricular activities that helped sustain them academically, mentally, and spiritually. Their life stories demonstrate the positive effects that interactions with caring and supportive teachers and counselors and caring adults can have on the lives of students. These supportive and caring relationships have helped to build the social capital that low-income, African American students need to improve their opportunities for positive academic outcomes. These young women’s unyielding persistence towards achieving their academic goals and the self-efficacy skills they developed have helped them navigate the many barriers and obstacles in their daily lives.
Chapter 6: Themes from Participants’ Narratives

The narratives of the nine young women are unique and highlight the absence of low-income, African American female college students’ voices in the higher education educational discourse in the United States. There has been much discussion and concern surrounding the “endangered” status of African American males, and it is a significant issue that deserves educators’ consideration and action. However, African American female students are oftentimes subsumed into the African American collective dialog, and rarely are their educational life stories illuminated and separated by their unique perspective as African American females. More often than not, they are grouped into the minority discourse and rarely given a chance to voice their educational experiences in a meaningful, distinctive, and reflective manner.

The themes that have emerged from this research study reflect academic optimism, parental absence and its effects on the participants’ academic and personal lives, and the impact and importance of having caring and trusting relationships, many of which are cultivated through extracurricular activities, as well as resilience and persistence. The significant role that community colleges play in the lives of low-income, African American young women has also emerged as an important broader issue that merits attention.

The Role of Community Colleges

Community colleges were established in the United States in the early twentieth century as institutions for educational preparation for attendance of four-year universities with Joliet Junior College being the first in 1901 (Crisp & Mina, 2012). The role of community colleges in the U.S. has evolved over the last several decades partly due to changes in the manufacturing of U.S. products and goods. U.S. manufacturing jobs accounted for nearly 30% of the major industrial sector jobs in 1950, and by 2007, after U.S. industrial companies began to shift
manufacturing jobs to countries outside the U.S., the share was reduced to 14%, less than half (Kasarda, 1995; Lee & Mather, 2008). American workers were faced with the decline of manufacturing jobs. The loss of manufacturing jobs began to signal an emerging sector of service related jobs that required new skill attainment. New U.S. domestic work policies were changing the U.S. workplace in many different ways, and U.S. workers were tasked with learning new skills.

Community colleges evolved into new 21st century training grounds for displaced workers (Henderson, 2012). Community colleges’ short-term degree and job certification program offerings provided an educational pathway to gain needed job skills that the new global economy demanded. American workers were able to participate in two-year associate degree and certification programs that helped prepare them for the demands of the new global workplace. Not only were there new demands on American workers, but also U.S. welfare-to-work programs in many states began to offer short-term vocational training to welfare recipients as they entered the new and changing workforce.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA; P.L. 104–193) set two-year time limits on welfare recipients to find work or lose their cash benefits and five-year lifetime limits on benefits (Polakow, Butler, Deprez & Kahn, 2004). The newly instituted work requirement set a time limit on the duration of cash benefits for welfare recipients and focused on work readiness not college education. The welfare-to-work policies of PRWORA permitted only a small percentage of welfare recipients to enroll in post-secondary education and steered single mothers towards community colleges’ vocational short-term diploma programs, thereby eroding the opportunities for welfare recipients to attend four-year universities due to the new time restrictions (Polakow, 2013).
The restrictive and punitive scope of PRWORA has become a major academic roadblock for many low-income single mothers trying to pursue post-secondary educational goals. Many low-income single mothers were forced to find low-wage employment in order to meet the work first mandates of the PRWORA and discontinue their post-secondary educational pursuits (Polakow, 2013). The state of Michigan’s PRWORA work first mandates were so punitive and restrictive that, by 2002, the percentage of low-income single mothers receiving welfare benefits while attending college was at a dismal 2% (Coalition for Independence through Education, 2002). Polakow (2012) argues that PRWORA severely restricted post-secondary educational access for the majority of poor single mothers who were further impoverished by the new welfare “reform” welfare-to-work mandates, cutting many poor female-headed households off welfare. They were forced into low-wage and unstable jobs to meet Work First requirements in the effort to continue to receive limited assistance in the form of cash benefits or childcare (Gault, Reichlin, & Roman, 2014). However, despite the obstacles placed in their paths, many low-income single mothers saw community college as an exit from poverty and enrolled while juggling work, school, and parenting (Polakow, Butler, Deprez & Kahn, 2004).

Currently, with the high cost of attending four-year universities (Kena et al., 2015), displaced U.S. workers, low-income, urban high school graduates, and single parents are choosing to attend community colleges for economic and remedial reasons more than ever before. It is important to note that the majority of American female college students enter post-secondary education at the community college level (Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2014). Community colleges are bridges to the four-year universities. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2014), of the 45% of U.S. community college students enrolled during the 2012 school year, 48% were African American students. Community colleges are the
starting point for a large number of low-income, African American women (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Wilson & Cox, 2011). Five out of the nine study participants attended community college for part of their education as the life stories of Eva, Carla, Halle, Nikki, and Pam attest.

Eva found herself enrolled in a community college after she was not able to take advantage of her admission into two, four-year universities because of the cost of attendance. She basically had to settle for attending a community college. Nikki was determined to become a physical therapist and chose to attend a community college in hopes of increasing her GPA and entering a physical therapy program at WSU. Pam initially was interested in attending the University of Detroit (U of D), but financially the cost of attendance placed U of D out of economic reach; she chose a suburban community college right outside the city of Detroit.

The U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS) reported the rate for African American female students enrolled in college was 9.7% in 2010, a 31% hike from the 7.4% reported during the 2000 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a). Although there has been an increase in the percentage of African American women entering college, the majority of enrollees are medium-income African American women, with only a slight increase in low-income, African American women entering college (Bailey & Dynarski, 2013).

The shift of funding post-secondary education from federal Pell grants to student loans in recent years has placed further barriers on low-income and working class students’ ability to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities (Hess, 2007). According to McKinney, Mukherjee, Wade, Shefman, and Breed (2015) two-thirds of community college students receive a federal Pell Grant, yet there is still a large percentage of community college students (80%) who have unmet financial needs. More and more community college students are taking out personal loans to complete their community college coursework (McKinney & Backscheider-
Burridge, 2015). Steele and Baum (2009) approximate 40% of community college students are graduating, due in part to receiving financial assistance in the form of federal and personal loans.

Some students elect to attend community college to strengthen their academic skills in preparation to transfer to four-year universities. According to Casazza and Bauer (2006), 53% of students are in need of remedial courses in community colleges. Halle and Carla both started their post-secondary education at four-year universities and found they were insufficiently prepared academically to continue at the university level, and so they transferred to community colleges to improve their academic skills. Halle is happier now that she is attending a community college “I started in January and I really enjoy it.” The closeness she experiences with her professors and classmates is an added benefit and was lacking in her experience at the larger four-year university.

Almost half of the students (40%) who attend four-year universities are enrolled in remedial courses as well as 53% of the student population in all post-secondary institutions (Casazza & Bauer, 2006). This points to the need for a college preparatory curriculum in all public high schools, especially those in underserved, urban public schools. These urban schools are characterized by extreme disparities in quality, teachers and educational resources. Casazza and Bauer (2006) insist, “First generation college students and minority students share multiple risk factors and are less likely to persist than those from other family backgrounds” (p. 9). Preemptive remedial activities would help to reduce the number of college students who are ill prepared for post-secondary educational opportunities.

Eva and Pam were steered towards community colleges for economic reasons. Neither had the funds to attend a four-year university. However, Eva and Halle were eligible for the state of Michigan’s Tuition Incentive Program (TIP), which would cover two years of tuition at a
community college, helping to cover the educational costs of an associate’s degree (State of Michigan, n.d.). Halle was the only study participant enrolled in TIP. After successfully completing two years at the community college level, Tip scholarship monies would cover an additional two years of tuition expenses at a four-year university, thereby covering the cost of a Bachelor’s degree for post-secondary students who are willing to begin their post-secondary studies at the community college level. Community colleges have evolved to become an important initial step towards pursuing post-secondary educational opportunities for a significant number of marginalized students, especially low-income, African American female students.

**Parental Absence and its Effect on Academic Achievement**

**A mother’s love.** There were different forms of parental absence identified in this research study. Eva, Brooke, Lisa, Mimi, and Olivia all experienced life without maternal love and care, lacking emotional and financial support from their mothers. Eva’s mother left Eva with her mom when she was in second grade. Eva still grapples with her mother’s abandonment and betrayal, as she never supported her emotionally or financially despite her father’s regular child support payments.

The study’s participants who lived without their mothers’ constant love and support express confusion, disappointment, and resolve regarding their mother’s lack of involvement in their lives. Some African American women who grow up without their mother’s presence in their lives report experiencing feelings of abandonment and perceive the emotional benefits of having a mother’s love and support during significant life events (e.g., graduations, weddings, childbirth) as a missing connection in their lives (Gardner, 2016).

Jeynes (2005) posits African American students who grow up with only one parent are at a greater risk of poverty than their two parent counterparts, as well as a lower level of parental
emotional and academic support. In the case of the young African American women in this study, dealing with maternal abandonment carries a litany of emotional, academic, familial, and social issues. A child that is abandoned by a parent or both parents may experience feelings of rejection, anger, despair and loss. These feelings can cause the child to feel “erased” by the parent and deemed not worthy of love and care (Granot, 2005). When a parent chooses to abandon his or her child, the child can internalize feelings of unworthiness and fear. Children who experience repeated patterns of abandonment by parents battling addictions or mental illnesses might experience the phenomenon of “toxic shame.” Toxic shame is transmitted through unspoken messages the parental absence conveys to the child, such as: you are not important enough to be cared for and loved; you are not valued as a person or as my child (Black, 2002).

Henderson (2009) attributed African American mothers’ absence from their children’s lives to a variety of situations (e.g., mothers who feel they are too young to nurture and care for their child, a desire to be free from their parental obligations, legal and drug problems that interfered with their maternal obligations). Henderson offers a new perspective on analyzing African American maternal absence, positing, “mother-child separation could be considered a form of caring,” meaning when the mother is not emotionally or financially stable, letting others care for her child might be considered an unselfish act of love (p. 44). Brubaker and Wright (2006) assert some African American teenage mothers experience a crisis of identity when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Brubaker and Wright’s study (2006) identified the loss of physical attractiveness, respect, and freedom that resulted from the unplanned pregnancies as unanticipated outcomes mourned by the teenage mothers, subsequently challenging their self-esteem and sense of belief in their ability to parent successfully.
Jacobs and Mollborn (2012) state there is a social and moral stigma that accompanies the circumstance of African American and Latino teenage pregnancy. Family conflict and strain along with economic hardships often are unforeseen consequences African American and Latino teenagers encounter as young mothers. The pronouncement of the unplanned pregnancy usually accompanies a rupture in the mother-daughter and other close familial relationships (e.g., fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles). The birth of the child can sometimes help the mother and daughter re-construct their relationship and formulate their new roles.

Brooke’s mother gave birth to her soon after her sixteenth birthday, followed by Brooke’s little sister when she was eighteen. Brooke deemed that having two children at such a young age took an emotional, physiological and economic toll on her mother and is probably the main reason why they (she and her sister) ended up staying with their great-grandmother (Nana). The only true and constant support Brooke received was from her Nana, whom she still talks to frequently about college and life in general. Nana’s support gave Brooke her emotional and educational foundation and helped sustain her. Lisa, who dealt with a childhood scarred by her mother’s mental illness, and her constant emotional abuse telling her as a child, “You not going to graduate, you never going to do this,” developed a determination and resilience to strive for something different. The demands of caring for a parent with a mental illness or substance abuse problem take an emotional and physical toll on the child that disrupts the family structure. Children and young adults living with a parent with a mental illness or substance abuse problem experience difficulty with the social and emotional adjustment that accompanies adolescent development and daily family life (Cooklin, 2009; Manning & Gregoire, 2006; Pakenham & Cox, 2014). Still, Lisa managed to persevere despite her mother’s numerous mental illness occurrences.
**Grandmothers: second time mothers.** Many African American children were affected by the crack epidemic that consumed the African American community in the 1980s and continues today (Mahan, 1996; Poe, 1992; Roe, Minkler, Saunders, & Thomson, 1996). During the last several decades, generations of African American children have been victims of the U.S. crack epidemic and found economic, emotional, and physical solace in the arms of their grandparents, especially their grandmothers. The worst decade of the crack cocaine epidemic (1985–1995) created an exodus of displaced and neglected children (over 3 million) from living with their custodial parents to living fulltime with their grandparents (Roe et al., 1996). Many grandparents faced the daunting task of parenting for the second time, while trying to provide economically for their grandchildren on fixed incomes. Although the state financially assists foster care providers, grandparents found themselves penalized for being related to their own grandchildren, consequently navigating yards of red tape to obtain financial assistance for their grandchildren’s care (Minkler, & Roe, 1993; Poe, 1992). Despite the hardships they encountered, many grandparents accepted the role of caregiver for their grandchildren, subsequently preventing their grandchild’s placement into the Foster Care system.

Mimi and her three siblings were casualties of both their parents’ drug addictions. Like so many African American children, their grandparents took custody of Mimi and her siblings, although it was Mimi’s great grandparents who rescued them otherwise, they would have been placed in the foster care system. Mimi now realizes the toll that took on her elderly great-grandparents stating, “They was retired so I wish they could have just like enjoyed retirement and we could have visit them every now and then instead of how it was where they raised us.”

Mothers and daughter have a special bond, one that when broken can create deep emotional scars. The effect of living without the constant love, emotional and financial support
of one’s mother denotes further research in relation to low-income, African American females. According to Gilford and Reynolds (2011) the reversal of the parental role between parent and child often has become an unavoidable consequence in low-income single parent households. In the narratives of Lisa and Olivia, the effects of their adult burden of being the main caretaker and financial provider of their siblings has caused an enormous psychological effect that was detrimental to their emotional and spiritual well-being.

The narratives of Eva, Brooke, and Mimi illustrate the deep wounds that maternal abandonment can create and illustrate how difficult they can be to mend, even after the mothers returned to the role of caretaker and nurturer. The deep-rooted feelings of resentment, guilt, and inadequacy that encompass their mother and daughter relationship are challenging to neutralize and reverse, especially since none of the study’s participants have ever sought any form of family counseling to assist in that regard. Many researchers argue parent involvement has a positive effect on the academic achievement of African American students (Gonzalez-Pienda, Nunez, Gonzalez-Pumarega, Alvarez, Roces, & Garcia, 2002; Williams & Sanchez, 2012). Allard (2008) argues maternal support and involvement increases a daughter’s social circle through networking and exposure to other female role models thus building their social capital. Burchinal, Campbell, Bryant, Wasik, & Ramey (1997) posit that maternal involvement increases an African American child’s academic achievement. Consequently, the absence of maternal support would indicate a lack of emotional, financial, and social support essential to a child’s personal, social and academic well-being, particularly in the case of an African American child encountering poverty and family instability.

Gilford and Reynolds (2011) discuss the effects of high poverty on the African American family dynamics and the emotional stress it can create for single mother households,
emphasizing the burden that Eva, Brooke, Olivia, and Mimi’s mothers may have endured having children at a young age without the emotional, social, and financial ability to care for them adequately. In the last several decades, the structure of the African American family has changed with an increase in single parent households. Gilford and Reynolds contend the economic repercussions of this shift in African American family dynamics have caused the “parentification” of the African American female college student. Brooke, Mimi, and Olivia were forced into a parental role without the emotional maturity and financial ability to do so adequately, nor should the responsibility of a parent be placed on them at such a young and vulnerable age. As young African American women, who are at a critical stage in their own social, emotional, and physiological development, the effects of such an experience may produce lasting trauma or result in producing a resilience that carries them through future life obstacles.

**Papa was a rolling stone.** All of the nine young women lived separately from their fathers for various reasons. Eva’s father is recently deceased, however even when he was alive, she lived apart from him. Seven out of the eight participants did not have a meaningful relationship with their fathers, if one existed at all. Fathers were absent from their daughters’ lives for various reasons such as broken relationships with the mothers, drug abuse, mental illness, or incarceration. Parental absence is a strong factor impacting children’s academic success (Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Nichols & Loper, 2012). Carla’s dad has been incarcerated off and on due to a substance abuse problem.

Recently released from a prison in California, and seeking reconciliation, Carla’s dad reached out to his sister for her number. Carla’s reaction to his request was reflective of her feelings of rejection “I’m kinda like with him like, if he do, he do, if he don’t, he don’t. I’m not tripping either way. I’m not sad about it… I don’t have a daddy complex. I don’t care.” To
Carla’s surprise her father actually called her and she admitted, “I was excited, I’m not gonna lie because I was like dang, this is my daddy. I haven’t seen him in a long time and he told me he was gonna call me, so he did.” Nichols and Loper (2012) argue that the incarceration of any immediate or extended family member (parent, sibling, aunt, uncle) may have a negative effect on the academic outcomes of the student and Arditti and Savla (2015) posit “parental incarceration has the potential to be traumatic and a potential pathway for social, emotional, and cognitive neurodevelopment impairments” (p. 551).

Mimi’s father was also incarcerated during her formative years. Mimi and her three siblings paid a high price for his mistakes and their parents’ inability to provide a safe and secure home. Their foster care placement with an abusive cousin has left emotional scars that have yet to heal. According to Morton (2005), children in foster care placements who suffer physical and mental abuse may exhibit signs of anger and maladjustment with a decrease in academic achievement. Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, and Rias-Salas (2015) argue children, either in long-term foster care placement, past placement or in danger of being placed in foster care, perform below average in reading and math. The stressors of being in a dysfunctional living situation negatively affect a child’s ability to learn and achieve academically.

Brooke’s father, a drug user, also suffered from schizophrenia and abandoned his parental responsibilities. Although Brooke has distanced herself from her father, asserting, “I’m not really affected in a bad way by it,” research studies indicate having an absent parent negatively affects children academically and emotionally (Jeynes, 2015; Krohn, & Bogan, 2001). Children with parents suffering from schizophrenia are often ill informed about their parents’ mental illness and are constantly worried about their parents’ welfare and their future care (Valiakalayil, Paulson, & Tibbo, 2004).
Olivia’s father also abandoned her causing deep emotional wounds “We rarely talk and, like, he doesn’t check up on me, he doesn’t see how I’m feeling, how I’m doing, or, you know, he’s just not there.” Lisa’s father was not physically absent, but was emotionally absent from her life. During one of her mother’s mental illness episodes, Lisa reached out to her father for guidance, but he was completely indifferent, telling her, “That’s your business. I don’t know what to tell you about your momma,” causing Lisa to feel, “My whole world shut down.”

Nikki’s father also took no parental responsibility for her and was absent emotionally and financially. He never comes around to check on her well-being and Nikki insists she is over his callous disregard, “He was just never really around …I kinda got content with his absence, like him not being around was kind of good. Like I don’t really care. I don’t call him.”

Halle’s biological parents were never married, and her father has not been a consistent parent, and this has caused many disagreements and hurt feelings between them. Her father abandoned the family when she was four years old, and his infidelity caused her parents to split up, and Halle’s dad rarely came around to see her even though he only moved three blocks away. His attitude of indifference, “I don’t want to be bothered with my own kids,” towards her as well as to her siblings has been a painful abandonment for Halle. Now that she is in college and living on her own, Halle often considers asking her dad for financial help; he is a firefighter and a former teacher, but he rarely provides her with any financial assistance.

African American females who live without their fathers experience greater economic stress and lower academic achievement (Gillette & Gudmunson, 2013). The effort to reconcile feelings of abandonment, hurt, and anger caused by living without a father in the home is a difficult task for some children, especially if the father left the home because of issues unrelated to his role as a father (e.g., broken relationship with the mother, drug abuse, mental illness, or
incarceration). Gillette and Gudmunson (2013) posit a father’s absence has a negative impact on the schooling outcomes and the emotional well-being of the child. Living without a father increases young women’s risk of experiencing anxiety disorders, depression, delinquent behaviors, and feelings of insecurity (Ackerman, 1999; Angel & Angel, 1993; Cheyne, 1988).

Krohn and Bogan (2001) found fatherless women drop out of college at a higher rate than their two-parent peers and suffer from lower self-esteem. However, the researchers observed receiving a mother’s love and support could “replenish” or diminish the consequence of the loss of the father-daughter relationship in their lives. The young women in this study demonstrated resilience and persistence despite parental abandonment and a determination to succeed, but deep scars remain motivating them “to make something” of themselves and accomplish their academic goals.

**The Impact of Supportive and Caring Adults: Coaches and Teachers**

**Extracurricular activities.** Covay and Carbonara (2010) determined that participation in extracurricular activities helped improve students’ non-cognitive skills and contributed positively to their academic achievement. Extracurricular activities are an essential component of a quality, well-rounded educational experience. Some studies suggest that extracurricular activities are motivating and have positive influences on students and towards school and coursework. Gender also has a significant role in academic achievement and participation in extracurricular activities. Many African American female students are negatively affected by the lack of extracurricular activity opportunities in urban schools (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010).

Many participants in this study have benefited from participating in extracurricular activities. Mimi’s participation in extracurricular activities helped her to escape an abusive foster care environment. Four out of the nine study participants (Brooke, Mimi, Pam, and Nikki)
attended charter schools in the city of Detroit and the surrounding Metropolitan area. Halle attended an application high school in the city of Detroit. These schools generally are well resourced and fully staffed. Olivia attended a science and math high school, which is a high school that focuses on preparing its students for math and science based careers. However, Eva and Carla attended public schools in the suburbs of Metropolitan Detroit. Lisa attended public high school in Detroit. Many of the music, art, and extracurricular programs have been reduced or cut from the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) because of an enormous budget deficit the district has been facing for the last decade (Kampfer, 2011).

Organizations such as the Police Athletic League (PAL) help sponsor extracurricular activities for students in urban communities who may have been affected by the lack of extracurricular activities in their urban school settings. PAL attempts to help and assist with keeping students motivated in a positive manner and on the right path in life; one particular program is Youthville. Youthville is a dance company for students in the metropolitan Detroit area. Lisa recalled being involved with Youthville during her high school years “I was cheering [and] I was dancing at Youthville.” Brooke recalled living with her “Nana” and taking advantage of an African dance program offered by her African centered elementary school.

**Supportive adults and coaches.** Not only did the study’s participants benefit from participating in extracurricular activities, they also began to form close, loving bonds with adults whom they learned to love and trust. These relationships would sustain them through some emotional, financial, and academic encounters that tested their determination to succeed academically. Mimi gratefully acknowledged her softball coaches who went above and beyond the call of duty for her. Mimi went on to explain how many times she would need a ride to practice, and she would be hungry having little to no food available at home to eat before
practice. She stated how grateful she was to her other coach because “he would buy me food and he would also pick me up.”

Having the support of her coaches during that critical time in her life, when she was separated from her other siblings and taken away from the only home she had ever really known was critical. Her coaches’ support was instrumental in helping her stay strong emotionally and mentally and not give up on herself or her academic ambitions. An added benefit of participation in extracurricular activities is the emotional support students may gain who live in unstable home environments. Lisa found camaraderie playing on her high school’s basketball team with her close friends her sophomore school year, and soon her basketball team became like her second family “Coaches felt like parents…any support I wasn’t getting from my parents I was getting from the [team].” Lisa realized how important the support of teammates and coaches could be after she observed how her sisters’ lives fell apart as soon as they stopped being engaged in afterschool activities.

Olivia also participated in afterschool activities. Later on in her high school years, Olivia would participate in cheerleading and dabble in basketball. However, soccer was by far her favorite sport, although she did not start playing until her senior year of high school. Participating in extracurricular activities encouraged Olivia to keep up her high grades.

As the experiences of Mimi, Lisa, and Olivia illustrate, involvement in extracurricular activities such as team sports provides an outlet for students’ emotional and athletic energy and an opportunity to become a member of a team working towards the same goal. Support and guidance from coaches who cared about their students’ welfare and academic outcomes may also help many students overcome difficult life circumstances. Many researchers argue that caring adults who provide constructive extracurricular activities for students help to promote the
attainment of beneficial social skills and improve students’ academic achievement. Additionally, students who are involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to be involved in destructive behaviors, such as skipping school and youth violence (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003).

**Supportive teachers.** All the students identified teachers who inspired and motivated them at pivotal moments in their academic lives, providing them with educational tools needed to pursue their academic aspirations. Some teachers leave a lifelong impression, and this was the case with Mr. Merrell and Mrs. Knoll, Halle’s two middle school teachers, who had a significant impact on her life and her early educational development. Halle says, “Mr. Merrell, he was my science teacher, best teacher in the world.” Halle admits even today Mr. Merrell’s classroom management techniques have a profound effect on her as a college student. Halle fondly recalls, “Those were my parents for those eight hours I was there [at school].”

Most kindergarten teachers do not pick their students up from their homes and spend the day with them, but that is just what happened to Mimi, who attended kindergarten at an elementary school on the west side of Detroit. Mimi fondly remembers her teacher saying, “I didn’t even realize like she was treating me kind of special… I’m pretty sure she could tell that I was like underprivileged.” That act of kindness has lingered with Mimi and she often wonders, “What did she see in me? What was she trying to do? I think maybe she did see some type of potential in me.”

Carla remembers being encouraged by one of her teachers during the sixth grade science fair. She recalls her saying, “You know you’re going to be a scientist one day. You’re really smart when it comes to science.” She says that always “stuck with her” even though she did not pursue science further. Carla also had a love for reading and remembers one particular teacher’s
act of kindness that has stayed with her to this day. Carla reasons that her teacher must have seen how much she loved to read and offered her extra books to take home over the school break. Carla, reflecting on her teacher’s kindness states, “I mean I appreciate it now because it probably did help me in some type of way.”

After confiding in her teacher about her mother’s mental illness and the issues she was struggling with dealing with it, Lisa states, “He would always check up on me.” Lisa recalls the last day of school her teacher called her over and gave her his card with his number written on the back and told her, “If you ever need anything call me,” she realizes that his kind gesture of concern has “always stuck in my head.”

Olivia gained self-confidence through a trusting relationship with one of her teachers, Mrs. Parish. Olivia recalls the kindness and love her beloved teacher offered her daily. Olivia gained valuable study tips from Mrs. Parish and with her wise words, “Just be patient with yourself, you gotta practice…you gone make it.” She inspired her, and, “She made me feel like I could do it.”

During Mimi’s foster care placement, she met her mentor, Mr. Washington, “He just been helping me ever since the day I met him. He just kinda of like took me in like a daughter.” Mimi credits Mr. Washington with helping her with “anything she needed.” She adds, “He helped me get into my high school.”

The narratives of study participants point to the extraordinary support they received from teachers as they navigated their educational journeys. The relationships they have experienced with these supportive teachers have provided needed emotional and academic support. Ruzek, Hafen, Allen, Gregory, Mikami, and Pianta (2016) found that students with emotionally supportive teachers experienced a higher level of motivation and academic achievement.
Academically vulnerable students, who began the school year at an academic disadvantage, demonstrated increased academic achievement and improved adult-child interactions after receiving consistent high levels of emotional support from their teachers throughout the school year (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

**Math: The Female Factor**

There have been increased efforts by educators and researchers to improve the level of math and science education that female students are exposed to as they matriculate through public schooling in the United States (Reis & Graham, 2005). Five out of nine research study participants have struggled with math courses one as early as third grade and others at different stages along their educational journeys. Some study participants have struggled more than others, yet they all acknowledged the difficulty they have encountered dealing with the subject of math. Halle started at a four-year college, but soon her grades plummeted and she struggled to complete her coursework successfully. Math was one of her biggest obstacles, and she struggled when it came to taking her math exams.

Hilton and Berglund (1974), over forty years ago, determined through their research study that girls lost interest in mathematics mainly because they saw no beneficial purpose for it in everyday life. According to Hilton and Berglund (1974), boys excel in mathematics after fifth grade and girls start to lose interest in the subject matter around the same time. In the forty years that have passed, girls’ views towards mathematics have changed very little. According to Blue and Gann (2008), girls and boys start kindergarten with the same set of math skills and girls end high school with lower math skills and self-esteem. Blue and Gann (2008) conducted a study which surveyed female students in grades 4 through 8 in Ohio and found that the majority of the girls lost interest in math around the sixth grade. One of the reasons for the decline in interest,
according to White (1995), is girls’ reluctance to speak up in a coed classroom for fear of being teased by the boys in the classroom.

Somewhere between elementary school and high school Carla began to really hate math. She had it in her mind, “I just can’t, I can’t do this [math].” And basically she “kinda gave up.” And then she met her new twelfth grade math teacher and she realized, “he cared about his students.” As a result of her math teacher’s patience and dedication to his students, Carla’s math skills improved and she proudly stated, “I actually did really well in his class my senior year.”

Surrounding herself with friends who were first-rate students was important and would become beneficial for Pam after she began to struggle with math around the third grade. Part of her struggle with math in high school was the high ratio of students to teacher and the fact that she was unfocused as a student. This being the case, she was grateful to have Mr. Shane as her high school math teacher because “he took out extra time in his day to help me.”

Unfortunately for Nikki, she did not encounter a patient and nurturing teacher as a part of her math experience, and she struggled throughout her schooling stating she had “developed a little math phobia … I was always struggling. Even today like in college, I still have a hard time.”

Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald’s (2002) study concluded the more female students identified as gender stereotypical females, the greater the likelihood their math attitudes followed gender stereotypes of males being more superior to females in math performance. The Women’s Educational Equity Act of 2001 (20 U.S.C. 7283 et seq.) was enacted to combat the gender bias that has been identified in elementary and secondary education practices. Gender bias was delineated in a study conducted by the American Association of University Women (1992). The study concluded girls’ declining interest in math could be partly attributed to teacher bias. The report states, “African American girls have fewer interactions with teachers than do White girls,
despite evidence that they attempt to initiate interactions more frequently” (p. 2). Cooper, Cooper, Azmita, Chavira, and Gullatt (2002) found one of the major obstacles to achieving post-secondary attainment for high school students were their early math grades.

Cheema and Galluzzo (2013) argue math anxiety and self-efficacy are the determinants for the variation in math performance of U.S. students when controlling for gender and socioeconomic status. Self-efficacy techniques, which involve the use of self-praise as tools, can be utilized to assist students in learning difficult math concepts and were introduced to Olivia by a caring and supportive teacher “I think it was my sixth grade year…Mrs. Parish, she was just this old lady, who just was like so gentle and kind and she would motivate me.” However in college, Olivia encountered a math professor whom she believed was prejudiced against African American students, stating, “He would not assist me, he would not do anything.” After the dean intervened, Olivia was able to successfully complete the math course.

Tucker (2000) founded the Self-Empowerment Theory of Achievement (SETA). SETA has five factors that relate to African American female students achieving math success. The ability to be self-motivated, as Olivia demonstrated, and the minimization of any self-defeating behaviors (e.g., poor study habits) are two important factors. Olivia, reciting Mrs. Parish’s words that comforted and motivated her to do and be better, “Oh, you can do it…don’t say you can’t” says all of Mrs. Parish’s encouragement was aimed at helping her to conquer her struggles with math, the only subject she really has to work hard at conquering. African American female students who learned how to motivate themselves with self-praise, either through the aid of a caring adult such as Olivia’s teacher, Mrs. Parish, or through their own efforts increased their chances of being successful in math. According to Tucker (2000), daily math practice, paying close attention during math instruction and the capacity to learn and order new math concepts are
instrumental tasks which assist African American female students in achieving math success. African American female students who demonstrated self-efficacy beliefs improved their academic and math skills.

The Presence of Academic Optimism in the Schooling Experiences of Low-income, African American Female College Students

The presence of academic optimism in the schooling experiences of low-income, African American female college students is documented throughout this qualitative study. The research on academic optimism (Smith & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et al., 2013; Woolfolk-Hoy, 2012) supports the narratives of the study’s participants. The study’s participants remain resilient and determined to succeed against all odds. The construct of academic optimism developed by Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk-Hoy (2006) was previously ascribed as a schooling characteristic of successful schools. These authors also point to the influence of social cognitive theory, social capital theory and learned optimism as shaping the conceptual framework of academic optimism.

Hoy et al., (2006) determined the construct of academic optimism as a characteristic of successful schooling outcomes through quantitative studies. The three interrelated concepts that comprise academic optimism are academic emphasis (the extent of tenacity the school exerts to achieve academic excellence), collective efficacy (a collective belief by teachers they can educate their students), and faculty trust in parents and students (Hoy et al., 2006).

The concept of academic optimism was explored in this research study in relation to participants’ perspectives in order to investigate whether such a construct has thematic relevance and it appears that the participants’ narratives are infused with the presence of academic optimism demonstrating academic emphasis, self-efficacy, and trusting and supportive relationships. The young women have navigated multiple barriers to pursue their post-secondary
educational opportunities. Several of the study’s participants (Carla, Halle, Nikki, Mimi, and Pam) have been persistently working towards their academic goals despite experiencing personal setbacks, economic and emotional struggles in their daily lives. Carla and Halle appealed their academic dismissals from the four-year universities they were attending. After being readmitted, they worked diligently to improve their academic status. Carla, reflecting on the many hurdles she has jumped to get back on point academically, recognizes her own strength of character.

Nikki, reeling from the emotional distress of losing her maternal grandmother, felt helpless as her academic standing declined. With the persistent and motivating influence of her mother, the assistance of a counselor, academic tutors, participation in afterschool programs, and her own renewed determination, Nikki was able to finally step out of the fog of grief that enveloped her and improve her academic grades. The memory of her grandmother was instrumental in helping her rebound emotionally and academically. Mimi, having overcome an abusive foster care placement and the loss of her great grandparents, managed to improve her academic standing and demonstrate the development of her own self-efficacy beliefs:

I feel optimistic because I feel I kind of already proven to myself that I’m capable of learning things and I’m capable of understanding things and just from the past, if I did it before, I know I can do it again!

Student self-efficacy beliefs are nurtured by how they perform academically and what resources are available to help them achieve their academic goals. When students have nurturing and supportive learning environments, it promotes academic achievement and enhances self-efficacy beliefs, increasing the opportunity to be successful academically. Lisa recognized her own academic potential even when her mother was not able to “The low expectations my mom set for me, I realized…I don’t want to settle for this low goal.” Brooke’s self-efficacy skills were
inherent but increased out of necessity, “It’s just the way I was brought up. Like it was like a win/lose situation. Like I didn’t have my mom and stuff, I had to learn how to do things on my own.”

The presence of trusting and supportive relationships was evident within the narratives of each of the study’s participants. Carla and Pam credited their mothers with having the greatest influence in their lives and being their biggest cheerleaders. Carla describes her relationship with her mother: “My mom supports me through everything…. My mom is my everything, no matter what. Like, we struggle together and we come up together.”

Brooke credits her Nana [her great-grandmother] with instilling in her a solid moral and spiritual foundation, which sustained her through her most difficult experiences “Maybe if I wouldn’t have been structured from her, I probably wouldn’t have graduated. I probably would have gave up a long time ago.” Brooke also acknowledged how her homeroom teacher would go the extra mile for her “She would stay after school if I need it and like she saw something was wrong.”

Mimi recalled when she took the test for admission into one of Detroit Public School’s application high schools, Mr. Washington “helped me get my letter of recommendation together.” Mimi is also thankful for meeting a woman she and her sister affectionately nicknamed their godmother. Mimi recalled her “godmother” attending a parent-teacher conference and how much it meant to her that her godmother cared enough to inquire about her academic progress.

Olivia really feels like she encountered a fairy godmother, Sue, an older White lady she met at church. Olivia acknowledged how generous Sue has been both emotionally and financially “I’m really thankful for her because without her, I really don’t know how far I would have gotten. I know I’m a strong enough female and I know I can do it.” However, Olivia
acknowledges it would be extremely difficult without Sue’s financial assistance. Olivia is also thankful for her boyfriend’s family, with whom she has been living since her senior year of high school and they also help her manage financially.

Halle acknowledged her favorite teachers, Mr. Merrell and Mrs. Knoll who have left an enduring and affirmative influence on her life. Halle describes Mr. Merrell as a teacher and a person, “He sees the potential in every last one of the kids that he taught. Whatever kid he came across, he sees something in you…so you can be on the right path.” Halle states having their support during those turbulent school years had a positive effect on her academic life.

The narratives of the study’s participants clearly identify the presence of academic optimism in their schooling lives. The participants’ self-efficacy beliefs were developed through the act of accomplishing their academic goals despite confronting numerous emotional, economic, and familial crises. These young women never lost their belief in their academic abilities even when others did. The narratives of Nikki, Brooke, and Olivia demonstrate the fortitude they exhibited by pressing on academically, even when teachers and professors have tried to block their educational path. The sheer determination to succeed academically, despite experiencing unfair treatment by their teachers and professors, is a characteristic of academic emphasis. The focus on one’s own ability to accomplish academic goals and the belief that they can be accomplished is the flame that ignites the participants’ pursuit of post-secondary educational opportunities.

The relationships of trust and support the participants have cultivated with family members, teachers, counselors, and caring adults have helped them to overcome many of the obstacles they have encountered. As Olivia so eloquently stated, “We all need help sometimes.” The students all have benefitted from the economical, emotional, and academic support from
others at one time or another during their academic lives. Sometimes, a little bit of help goes a long way.

**Resilience.** All of the young women exhibited resilience in their academic lives. Eva, Carla, Mimi, Brooke, and Olivia experienced instability in their home environments resulting in relocation outside of their home environments for varying periods of time. Eva and Olivia left their homes and their single mothers permanently.

Brooke, Mimi, Carla and Eva received love and support from extended family members, their teachers and coaches, who helped to provide the needed love and care they were not receiving from their parents. This support helped to create resilience in their daily lives and the ability to continue their post-secondary educational pursuits.

Jordan (2005) posits girls who are under high levels of stress and anxiety may engage in caretaking activities. They create support systems through relationships, often with other females friends. A study of 12,000 adolescents conducted by Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, and Jones (1997) identified the presence of a supportive relationship with a teacher, parent, or mentor as a good indicator of a student’s ability to avoid risky behaviors and develop resilience. Many of the study’s participants stated they leaned on teachers, coaches, mentors, godmothers and caring adults to supply the emotional, academic and financial support that they were not receiving from their immediate family members.

**Persistence.** The level of persistence demonstrated by the study’s participants could be considered Herculean in nature. Olivia constantly had to motivate herself to keep moving in a positive direction despite her mother’s negligence and callous disregard. She was often homeless and searching for a stable home “I just gotta keep telling myself like you know, you was here for a purpose and you was made to do something good. I want to see myself do something good and
be something good.” Olivia knew she couldn’t give up “because if I did, then I’d be like
everybody else in my family that gave up.” Olivia believed college was the answer to her
situation “I was thinking about college my eight grade year. It [education] is everything to me...I
knew that you couldn’t do anything without an education.”

Boyraz, Horne, Owens, and Armstrong (2013) argue that African American female
college students who have suffered from a least one traumatic experience benefit academically
by becoming involved in groups or activities on campus that may provide them with a sense of
belonging and increase their college persistence. Also, taking advantage of the mental health and
counseling sessions that college’s offer may assist African American female students
academically and help them to focus and neutralize any lingering effects of the traumatic event.
All of the students have endured negative or traumatic events in their pursuit of post-secondary
educational opportunities. Brooke was determined not to give up and to keep striving for
something better “I was self-motivated.” Her persistence and resilience helped her to achieve her
academic goal of attending a four-year university, despite her mother’s objections.

Hill (2009) found that African American female college students utilize three coping
strategies to advance their college persistence—discussing problems and possible solutions with
friends, possessing an optimistic approach to their educational journey, and believing in a
spiritual force outside of themselves. The study’s participants believed in their ability to achieve
their educational goal of obtaining a bachelor’s degree. Achieving her goal of graduating college
continues to be immensely motivating for Mimi, and the fact that she has completed her first
year of college, “It means I’m halfway there actually, like I’m almost there. I can’t give up now.
I got to keep pushing.”
Developing Agency and Self-efficacy Skills through Protective Practices and Self-Dialogue

Suizzo (2007) found that African American parents placed a high value on developing agency in their children to counter the effects of microaggressions and combat potential barriers to their academic success. Personal strengths such as character, self-confidence, and a sense of purpose helped African American children develop agency that served as a protective factor and a tool to combat the forces of racial, economic, and social inequalities at work in their daily lives. Facilitating agency in African American students is an important protective practice to increase positive educational outcomes and general well-being. However, in my study, many of the young women experienced difficult and often traumatic childhoods and were not often the beneficiaries of good parenting; yet they, too, developed coping strategies.

African Americans youth who demonstrate resilience and academic persistence utilize various coping strategies to overcome personal, socio-economic, and educational barriers they may encounter (Snyder et al., 2002). One strategy utilized by the low-income, African American female participants in this study was self-dialogue, which they employed to build self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs. Eva’s self-talk is evident by her statement of intention “I know I’m capable of going out there and getting what I want and like making things happen for myself.” Carla, healing from her own past educational missteps, tells herself, “I just gotta to do it right and be you know self-motivated and ‘cause I can do it and I know I can do I and I’ve done it.” These affirmations have helped her to continue on her educational path towards the promised land of a four-year university. Pam prepared herself for her next academic milestone through self-talk and motivation “Probably after eighth grade graduation, I was ready for my next graduation and then I was like, well after that graduation, I’m going to college.”
In addition, the capacity to utilize school support networks played a key role in some participants’ success, building self-confidence and self-efficacy. Halle’s last minute rush to apply to four-year universities was made possible, as she states, “Because I had the support system of the school.” Halle appreciatively recalls how having the support of teachers and school administrators during a hectic time in her life (her mother’s multiple surgeries) was reassuring and helped her make it through the majority of her high school years “[They] had my back whether I needed anything for school whether it was supplies, underwear, [or] a ride home.” Halle’s relationships at her school created networks of social capital, she was able to utilize to ensure positive academic outcomes. Mimi’s mentor, Mr. Washington, encouraged Mimi to take the test for admission into one of Detroit Public School’s application high school, only after Mr. Washington “helped me get my letter of recommendation together.” Mimi thinking about all of the obstacles she has overcome states, “I think I proved that I was strong…I’m stronger that what I really thought I was.”

The story of Mimi and her mentor Mr. Washington is one of meaningful mentoring. Debro (2012) created a mentoring program specifically to help marginalized African American and Latino students create a pathway to four-year universities and gain social and cultural capital by pairing small groups of community college students with a community college faculty member. The mentoring program helped the students forge close bonds with faculty members, whom they may have never really had a chance to interact with and provided a level of support that is absent at many community colleges. Creating supportive and nurturing relationships is critical to building social capital.

The support of key family members (often grandmothers) also played a crucial role in building self-efficacy and resilience. Nikki reflects on her academic rebound in middle school
from failing grades after her beloved grandmother’s death “I think it was always the constant reminder of my grandma just telling me, you can do this, you got this.” Those seven words of comfort wrapped her in a blanket of protection and allowed her to step out of the fog of grief and depression and rise to her academic potential. Brooke recalling her mother’s lack of support admits, “Sometimes when I’m sad about it, I have to think like well you’ve been doing it on your own, you got to keep doing it on your own…like I didn’t have my mom and stuff, I had to learn how to do things on my own.” Brooke is grateful for her grandmother’s support and guidance and believes without it, she would have never reached a four-year university.

Pam’s family has given her unconditional support with all her endeavors, even her extracurricular activity of tap dancing. They have never missed a performance and it means a lot to Pam, “[I’m] proud that I had their support because I’ll be nervous when I’m getting out there and then when I see them and how many people it is, I’m just like, I got this and I’ll keep going.” Researchers have cited family support as a contributing factor in student’s academic success (Jeynes, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Sanders, 1998). Olivia is probably the most resilient of all the study’s participants: time after time, she has found shelter after her mother has thrown her out onto the mean streets of Detroit. Olivia’s boyfriend’s mother is a doctor, whom Olivia considers as her role model “I’m looking to my boyfriend’s parents to get inspiration…she did it, I can do it too.” Olivia admits that it is painful living without her parents’ love and support and sometimes she gets a little down and out, but then she realizes, [I have a] very little circle, but that’s all I need. I got my little village, so I’m good.” This circle of support has carried her a mighty long way, all the way to the Promised Land of a four-year university.

These young women acquired academic confidence after receiving the emotional support of caring teachers, family members, mentors, friends, and other significant adults. The positive
and supportive relationships articulated in participants’ narratives highlight the missing “network of support” Maeroff (1998) identifies as an important educational tool to benefit urban school children. One of the many positive outcomes resulting from the participants’ involvement in extracurricular activities was the nurturing support of coaches, teachers, and supportive adults. This in turn increased academic engagement and built social and educational capital, which emerges as essential if low-income students are to overcome the many obstacles they encounter in pursuit of their academic goals.

**Social Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) identified the “social space” as a field of social interactions involving agents of varying levels of economic and social means. These agents’ innate knowledge of “the rules of the game” in these social fields contributes to the gap in social capital between wealthy and low-income students. Many low-income, African American students have limited knowledge of “the rules of the game” due to their lack of access to cultural and financial resources, extracurricular activities, mentors, and economic mobility (Dika, & Singh, 2002). Many low-income students only gain educational and social capital through access to these “social spaces.” Low-income students benefit from relationships with influential and resourceful people creating access to social networks and resources needed to acquire educational and social capital and educational mobility (Hardie, 2015).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argue that children from the dominant class have an inherent social and cultural advantage because of their innate knowledge of cultural capital based on their culture’s own perceptions and values of what objects, fine arts, and activities constitute and possess cultural value. They have an unfair advantage over middle and low-income students, who are trying to acquire and increase their cultural and social capital through the creation of
relationships and interactions with individuals, and/or groups who have valuable knowledge and resources that they need to advance financially and educationally.

Current Realities of Olivia, Eva, Pam, Brooke, Lisa, Nikki, Carla, Mimi, and Halle

Olivia refuses to give in to the self-pity that can sometimes overwhelm her. Her motto is “No regrets...I feel like everything happens for a reason.” Olivia is committed to obtaining her college degree and going to medical school, and she won’t let anything or anybody get in her way. Olivia still loves school even after struggling to maintain her good grades despite the instability she has experienced in her home life “I taught myself to love a challenge.” Now as she completes her first year of college, Olivia is determined to achieve her goal of becoming a doctor. She plans to work “very hard, extremely hard, it’s like bloody knuckles after punching a punching bag,” to achieve her academic goals.

Eva is confident she will complete her community college coursework and transfer to a four-year university “I got myself this far and I’m pretty sure, well I’m confident that I [will] get myself to where I want to be.” Pam has always held the belief and confidence that she could and would achieve her academic goals “It was always in my head that I’m going to school and I’m doing this. I’m very determined. What I say I want, I’m going to go get it and I’m trying to keep that mindset towards my education.” Whether or not her mother, or the rest of her family is interested in her academic success, Brooke’s confidence in her academic abilities is evident “Like I know what I’m capable of doing. Like, I just won’t give up, so, like, I just got a goal set in my mind that I want to fulfill, that I want to reach.”

Lisa left her mother and little brother to attend a four-year university approximately an hour away and emphatically stated, “I came here [to college] with this goal [graduating]. Nobody going to achieve this goal for me, nobody going to do it for me, so I got to do it on my own.”
Nikki’s grandmother always instilled in her to do her best; recalling her grandmother’s words of encouragement she states them with pride, “Push yourself, because if you don’t who will?”

Carla believes she has learnt a lot about the person she was and the person she has become over these last couple of turbulent college years. She is currently living with her mother in a senior living complex. Carla is determined to complete her education. She is preparing to take two online courses at her community college and she has no plans of giving up anytime soon.

Mimi realizes having the support of her grandmother, Mr. Washington, her teachers and coaches inspired her to go for her goal of being a medical doctor. Mimi reflecting on all of her experiences along her long journey to college states, “If I could get through that, I could get through this [college].” Mimi’s great grandfather died last year, but he lived long enough to see her make it to college. Achieving her goal of attending college, holds so much meaning for Mimi, she is determined to graduate. Mimi currently has a 4.0 grade point average and is attending a four-year university in southeastern Michigan.

Halle has been taking advantage of some volunteer and mentoring opportunities where she is currently attending school and working, because her career goal is to one day “work with juvenile delinquents.” She reasons, “You know a kid, you can still kind of love and mold them.” Her major is criminal justice, and she believes there is a real need for someone with her perspective to be there for youths that may be off the right path for various reasons. She is struggling with moving back to Detroit to attend community college. Halle has a love/hate relationship with the city of Detroit. She has seen many of her friends get killed and caught up in illegal activities; on the other hand, all of her supportive relationships are in the city. That is why making the decision to go home is one that she will contemplate and evaluate carefully.
The low-income, African American female college students in this study have all overcome barriers and obstacles in their pursuit of their academic goals. Whether they have begun their educational journeys at the community college level or at four-year universities, the determination and will to obtain their college degrees is palpable. Some of the study participants have the love and support of family members to propel them forward and continue their efforts. Other participants have found caring and supportive adults willing to provide the love and support missing in their relationships with their immediate family members. And all are academically engaged. These young women have persisted with great courage and resilience to pursue their dreams of a college education, demonstrating new formulations of academic optimism. The concepts of persistence and resilience have been identified in the study as strong components of low-income, African American female students’ academic optimism and play a significant part in their schooling lives.
Chapter 7: Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

The life stories of the young African American women in this study resonate with their spirit of resilience, persistence, and academic optimism demonstrated by their determination to achieve their academic goals despite all the forces at work against them. They have overcome many obstacles to obtain their post-secondary educational aspirations. This educational achievement has been accomplished with the help of various teachers, school counselors, school administrators, mentors, family and friends, who have encouraged, financed, motivated, tutored, and assisted them along their educational journeys towards the promised land of educational opportunity—a four-year university.

Careful analysis of the participants’ life histories revealed pivotal moments and turning points in their lives, which illuminated the characteristics of academic optimism, and the identification of two additional themes—resilience and persistence. The findings in this study demonstrate that the character traits of resilience and persistence along with self-efficacy beliefs, trusting and supportive relationships, and academic emphasis comprise the essential components of low-income, African American female students’ academic optimism.

It is important to note that minimal if any qualitative research has been conducted exclusively on low-income, African American female college students, particularly in relation to the construct of academic optimism. This qualitative study is one of the first to explore the presence of academic optimism in their schooling lives to date. The significance of this research is clear: low-income, African American, female college students’ lives matter and they need to be valued and documented. The urgency of exploring their life histories to determine the facilitators of their academic optimism and the barriers they have overcome to achieve post-secondary educational status cannot be over-emphasized. The high percentage of African
American single female-headed households (66%) means that African American females, who obtain college degrees improve their lives, as well as the lives of their children (Kids Count Data Center, 2016). Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006) report college attendance, even without completion of a degree improves the lifetime earnings of African Americans by 50% and completing an associate degree improves their lifetime earnings by 60%, and the completion of a bachelor’s degree more than doubles their lifetime earnings with a startling 110% increase (Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006). The attainment of a four-year college degree was the main educational goal of all of the participants in this study.

The self-efficacy beliefs the study participants developed and nurtured were evidenced by their life stories and their sheer will to attend college and try to make a better life for themselves and their families while straddling issues of poverty (e.g., high crime neighborhoods, high unemployment, inferior schools, drug abuse, child abuse, poor nutrition, parental absence, parental incarceration, mental illness). Some middle class and wealthy college students have access to preparatory courses; scholarship opportunities, financial assistance, family networking connections, and one-on-one tutoring, which most low-income, African American students are not privy to (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). These issues of social and educational inequality affect the educational outcomes of many low-income minority students, and even more severely for low-income, African American female students, who also carry the trifecta societal burden of race, gender, and class. This research illuminates and documents these young women’s struggles for a decent life. Also, the young women voice their own beliefs about obtaining a college education and what it will provide for them—economic freedom for themselves and their families both present and future.
Many African American parents believe that a college education will free their children from financial instability, living in crime-ridden neighborhoods, and help them to become a contributing member of society (Billingsley, 1992; Thompson, 2003). This persistent belief that many African Americans have in higher education as a route out of poverty carries the connotation of crossing the River Jordan and making it to the promised land of economic opportunity and freedom from racial discrimination and second-class citizenry. Whether or not these beliefs pan out is somewhat irrelevant; because the fact that this belief motivates millions of African American parents and their children to strive for the promised land of educational achievement is, in itself, a statement about the lack of social, economic, and educational capital possessed by African Americans and other minorities in this country.

What K-12 Educators Need to Do to Support Low-income, African American Girls and Build Social Capital

Public schools have been charged with the task of educating all children regardless of the diversity of the student population, or their socioeconomic status. Yet, low-income students begin school with many disadvantages. Many low-income children attend poor quality childcare centers and have little access to public preschool or Pre-K programs (Polakow, 2007). Head Start reaches only 42% of income-eligible children (Schmit, Matthews, Smith, & Robbins, 2013). Hence students start their educational journeys with different levels of academic experience resulting in a diverse range of cognitive and developmental stages.

Although there have been some gains in access to early childhood education for poor and low-income children, in 2012 less than half of poor children (46%) and slightly more than half of low-income children (52%) were enrolled in center based childcare programs compared to their higher income peers with a 72% rate of enrollment (Child Trends, 2014).
early years contributes to educational disparities and varying levels of academic abilities and skills. Students who attend pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs are exposed to educational enrichment and cultural activities and institutions via field trip excursions (e.g., children’s museums, science museums, zoological institutions) that build social capital and social engagement. However, for children in poverty who are shut out of high quality early educational experiences, denied access results in exclusion and marginalization as they enter K-12 institutions lacking social capital through participation in these activities and interaction with their peers in social and academic settings.

Low-income, African American female students are often left at a disadvantage in K-12 public educational institutions; not only must they overcome any biases and/or preconceptions public schools educators and school administrators may have towards them, they must also turn these educators into allies in order to develop the necessary relationships with these institutional agents (teachers and school administrators) to acquire the knowledge and gain the social capital needed to contribute to and mobilize their academic success (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

The population of African American students in the K-12 public school system as of 2013 was 16%, with Hispanic students accounting for 25% of the public school student population for a combined African American and Hispanic minority public school population of 41%, while the majority of public school teachers are White (82%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The need for anti-bias teacher-training that sensitizes White teachers to racial, economic, and cultural diversity and helps them to examine their own personal beliefs about minority students is paramount when one considers the power they hold as gatekeepers of valuable resources and information that minority students need to gain social capital and maximize their educational opportunities. All public school teachers should avail themselves of
every professional development opportunity to learn about cultural differences, diversity, and best educational practices that incorporate and celebrate cultural differences in their daily educational practices (Hawkins, 2014; Thompson, 2003).

Yosso (2005) calls for a shift in our “sources of knowledge” and suggests students of color bring a wealth of cultural knowledge with them to the classroom that is being ignored, dismissed, and unacknowledged. Yosso (2005) is critical of Bourdieu’s (1986) claim that students of color (low-income) lack social and cultural capital and insists that they possess community cultural wealth that has been under-utilized in academia and in the educational classroom setting. Yosso (2005) identifies five forms of capital that comprises community cultural wealth: aspirational capital, familial capital, navigational capital, resistant capital, and linguistic capital (p. 78). Yosso (2005) urges educational institutions and educators to restructure their theories and curricula around a broader definition of cultural and social capital; one that includes the perspectives of students of color. Morris (2004) echoes this argument, “It is important that social capital theory also consider the agency and sustenance that are characteristic of African American people” (p. 192).

Inclusive teaching practices and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) that support African American students’ cultural heritage and incorporate their unique cultural knowledge should be implemented to increase students’ academic engagement in school and enhance their self-identity (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This also serves as a counter narrative to the misconceptions and negative imagery that lingers in U.S. society regarding African Americans and their cultural history in America (Hawkins, 2014). Teachers and school support staff who act as mentors and role models fulfill an urgent need African American female students have for positive role models and mentors.
Urban schools that implement mentoring programs for their students—especially African American female students—help to build their academic optimism through the accessibility of supportive and trusting relationships. African American female students who have supportive relationships with teachers, parents, mentors, guardians, and friends build social capital and valuable resources that help them to achieve positive academic outcomes. These are some of the approaches educators and school administrators should utilize to promote positive self-identity and increase African American female students’ self-esteem, which assists them with building social capital. All of the study participants listed one or more supportive relationships that helped them achieve a major academic goal and/or increased their self-efficacy beliefs during critical times in their schooling lives.

**Educational Policies and Practices Needed to Increase Young African American Women’s Social Capital and Academic Optimism**

Teachers are gatekeepers of specific types of knowledge and valuable resources that students, especially low-income minority students need to acquire to increase their opportunities for academic success (Bartee, & Brown, 2007). Teachers therefore must be consistently fair when dealing with all students and not select “special students” to help and neglect those who they feel are lacking socially or academically. Low-income, African American girls are especially susceptible to being ignored and judged harshly for their mannerisms and behavior (Evans-Winters, 2011; Fordham, 1996; Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2009). Fordham (1996) asserts “Academically successful African American girls achieved their success by remaining silent or voiceless or alternatively by impersonating a male image” (p. 27). The presence of caring, empathetic, and supportive teachers takes on even more significance when
schools, teachers, and students are all striving for a school environment that promotes self-identity, affirm cultural differences, and promote academic optimism.

Home visits can be an effective way of encouraging empathy in teachers of young children in the early grades and enable teachers to connect in a real and meaningful way with their students while at the same time forming partnerships with their families. Teachers gain a real sense of the challenges a student faces daily (academic, social, emotional, and economic) when they are invited into the student’s home environment. In the older grades, creating home-school partnerships through community-based activities and school social functions such as community potlucks, literacy and math game nights, school gardens, and school picnics can help to form supportive relationship based on mutual respect and trust, contributing to the building of the components of academic optimism.

Field trips to college campus with students as early as the elementary level are recommended; especially when considering the opportunity to build social capital in low-income, African American students, who for the most part, rarely travel outside of their home environments. The opportunity to observe African American students in a college setting could positively affect young students’ views of college and contribute to their development of college aspirations. Offering early admission programs to community colleges is another way high school students can be exposed to and experience college life, while obtaining college credits towards an associate degree or certification program. Some community colleges even offer four-year degree programs. Eva, Pam, and Halle, three of the study’s participants enrolled in and benefited from early community college admission programs.

Teachers and school administrators who create a safe space for low-income, African American students to explore who they are and hope to be through educationally enriching
activities such as field trips, academic excursions, visits from guest speakers, sponsoring a school career day, and extra-curricular activities support low-income students’ self-efficacy; and this promotes the belief that they can achieve academic success through hard work, academic dedication, and self-discipline, thereby promoting academic emphasis in students, one of the components of academic optimism.

**Best educational practices.** Schools that are inclusive of all students, practice CRP, and value diversity in their student population are on track for 21st century best educational practices (Hawkins, 2014). Teacher-led parent-school partnerships, communication outside the classroom and school setting, and respect for and affirmation of cultural differences are some of the best practices schools can utilize to increase low-income, African American students’ academic optimism and social capital. Schools that embrace the community they are situated in are vital to the development of inclusive educational practice. Afterschool programs, tutoring services, General Education Diploma (GED) programs, family counseling and social services, emergency financial support and resources, and community outreach programs are just some of the services public schools can provide to embrace low-income, African American students and their families. Strengthening low-income, African American families with pillars of support allows low-income, African American students to focus on academic endeavors and increase their chances for positive academic outcomes, thus creating a school environment that promotes academic optimism and helps build students’ social capital.

**What Post-Secondary Institutions Should Do to Build Low-income, African American Women’s Social Capital**

Post-secondary educational institutions have limitless opportunities to build low-income, African American students’ social capital through the very nature of their organizational
structures. Programs for low-income, African American students that include the opportunity to create meaningful relationships with school administrators and high status peers would be invaluable towards building social capital. For example, post-secondary educational institutions could pair new low-income, African American female students with big sister mentors or faculty members who could serve as role models and assist students with their acclimation to college life.

Post-secondary institutions can increase the retention and support of low-income, African American female students while building their social capital with the creation of student organizations to support their transition to the post-secondary educational setting and their new status as college students by assisting them with wrap-around services that include childcare for parenting students, tutoring, housing, dining services, and expanded financial scholarships instead of loans.

Minority student organizations that are supported by post-secondary institutions play a key role in promoting social engagement and developing social networks. In addition, such organizations provide a forum for African American students and other minority students to celebrate their heritage, which is vital to their emotional and social well-being and promote a sense of belonging. Cultural centers and student community spaces provide the freedom for African American students to explore other students’ cultural differences and create valuable relationships with students from other cultural and economic backgrounds, building social networks to be utilized later on in their educational journeys.

Promoting self-advocacy and student leadership opportunities such as service learning, student councils, and other civic engagement activities encourage student participation in social networks, which help to build social capital. Participating in student leadership opportunities especially benefits low-income, African American students by providing them with the
opportunity to learn about two of the knowledge types Stanton-Salazar (1997) describes as organizational/bureaucratic and network development knowledge. Post-secondary institutions are in a unique position to offer opportunities for building social capital in low-income, African American female students’ academic lives while increasing their diversity and inclusion initiatives on their college campuses, a win-win for all parties involved. Low-income, African American female students need every opportunity to achieve successful post-secondary educational outcomes.

**What Do These Stories Tell Us About the Role of Resilience and Persistence?**

The low-income, African American female college students in this study exhibited heroic feats of resilience and persistence. Eva’s mother basically dropped her off at her grandmother’s house like a load of laundry. Through the hurt and pain of her mother’s abandonment; she never lost sight of her goal to attend a four-year university. Her persistence has paid off and she will be attending a four-year university for the 2016–2017 school year in southeastern Michigan. Carla lost sight of her academic purpose and was academically dismissed from her four-year university, yet she summoned the resilience and persistence to gain readmission to the university and successfully complete her semester. Halle also fought her way back to her four-year university and happily exchanged her university status for community college. The slower academic pace and smaller class sizes were just the right educational combination to help her succeed academically. Pam’s persistence to become a nurse has led her to enlist in the U.S. National Guard in exchange for tuition and financial assistance. Nikki refuses to give up her dream of becoming a physical therapist, although the majority of the coursework involves math, her least favorite academic subject, still she refuses to allow her math difficulties to stop her from achieving her career goal and is persistent in seeking tutelage with her math courses.
Physical and emotional abandonment by Brooke’s mother resulted in Brooke and her sister spending most of their childhood with their maternal grandmother. Brooke’s resilience manifested itself after repeatedly being put out her mother’s house, and she still managed to graduate high school and gain acceptance into a four-year university. Mimi endured parental abandonment through her parents’ drug addiction and incarceration, foster care placement, and the death of her beloved great grandparents yet through it all, she always believed in her ability to achieve her academic goals. Lisa’s mother’s battle with mental illness has fine-tuned her resilient spirit. No matter how many mental health crises her mother experiences, Lisa has vowed to keep her mother out of state mental health institutions and provide the care she may need.

Olivia was ridiculed and laughed at by her peers in elementary school for asking too many questions about math concepts she could not comprehend; yet she remained resilient and gained academic skills that increased her self-efficacy beliefs. Olivia was basically homeless for most of her high school years, depending on the kindness of strangers to graduate from high school; yet she never gave up, demonstrating resilience in her efforts to achieve her post-secondary educational aspirations.

**Resilience and persistence as components of students’ academic optimism.**

Cunningham and Swanson (2010) relate African American high school students’ educational resilience with academic self-esteem (the beginning of self-efficacy beliefs) and support from teachers, school support staff, and school administrators resulting in supportive and trusting relationships between students and school personnel. All of the study’s participant recall teachers, counselors, and coaches who helped them to maintain their academic journeys despite the many stumbling blocks life threw along their paths. Morales (2008) explored academic resilience and gender in higher education and found African American female students experienced more
familial resistance concerning their educational pursuits than African American male students. The presence of supportive and nurturing relationships have allowed the African American female students in this study to overcome familial resistance and other barriers to their educational pursuits.

All of the study’s participants have demonstrated resilience, persistence, and the three characteristics of academic optimism—academic emphasis, self-efficacy, and the creation of trusting and supportive relationships. The analysis of their life histories and exploration of the meaning of their educational journeys expands and extends the construct of academic optimism and contributes to a unique understanding of academic optimism grounded in the lives of low-income, African American female students.

**Directions for Future Research**

This dissertation points to the need for further research on the topic of academic optimism and a deeper understanding of the life histories of low-income, African American students. While this study did not focus on low-income, African American male students, it would constitute a rich area of research. In addition, the focus on low-income, African American female students could be extended to other ethnic minority female students, including young women who are recent immigrants or student mothers who experience many barriers due to lack of access to high-quality affordable childcare. They are other demographic constituencies whose stories have not been told in this study. The role that academic optimism plays in childhood and young adulthood in different social, cultural, and economic contexts should also be further explored.
Final Recommendations

How to build social capital in the schooling lives of low-income, African American students. Stanton-Salazar (1997) asserts teachers as institutional agents have the power to “initiate and foster the development of the proper dispositions and motivational dynamics” through offering moral support and academic guidance (p. 3). Stanton-Salazar (1997) insists the importance of forming social ties with teachers cannot be understated. Teachers’ ability to connect students with the essential resources and knowledge required to “participate within mainstream institutional spheres, particular the school system” (p. 10) is vital to their academic success.

Teachers must consider all students fairly and consistently and offer guidance, tutoring, and support whenever needed—especially to socially and economically disadvantage students. The current reality is that many urban schoolteachers are inundated with numerous standardized testing periods throughout the school year, overcrowded classrooms, old and dilapidated buildings, too few resources (Lipton, 2011; Noguera, 2006; Scott, 2011), and find it difficult to give personalized assistance to all the students that need it. Although there are many issues teachers have to deal with daily, focusing on the needs of their students must be their first priority. Organizing extracurricular activities (e.g., debate teams, Junior Achievement groups, Junior Toastmasters, golfing, etc.) will allow minority students to learn the different forms of knowledge required to increase their social capital and maximize their positive academic outcomes (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Creating conditions for academic optimism in low-income, African American female college students’ lives. First and foremost, an economically secure foundation is needed for children to thrive academically, grow up healthy, and promote cognitive, social, and emotional
developmental growth. Unsafe and hazardous housing, lead polluted water, poor nutrition, and
dangerous neighborhoods do not promote normal cognitive and physiological growth. The
United States has a responsibility to care for and protect all of its citizens, especially low-income,
minority citizens who suffer the greatest when it comes to governmental and state budget cuts
and appropriations. As a society, the United States should reestablish some of the social safety
nets that President Roosevelt put into place with the enactment of the New Deal after World War
II (Palmer, 1992). Many of the programs he initiated have been eliminated or reduced greatly,
such as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC)—financial assistance to mothers with dependent
children. Current welfare policies have placed time limits and work requirements on mothers
with dependent children, and leave them with little or no options to obtain quality childcare for
their children when these children are at their most vulnerable (birth to six years old; Polakow,
Butler, Deprez, & Kahn, 2004). Restoration of full financial assistance for mothers of dependent
children from birth to adulthood, and removing the harsh time limits and restriction that have
been enacted by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act
(PRWORA) of 1996 (Finney, 1998) would be essential to the overall well-being of low-income,
African American female students and student parents.

Many low-income, minority female students are tasked with caring for younger siblings,
while their mothers are trying to maintain work requirements to enable them to retain the little
financial and food assistance they may be still eligible for. Mostly these caregiver activities fall
to the female students and not their male counterparts (Garcia-Reid, 2007). These caregiver
activities usually require the female students to miss school and important instructional time,
further exacerbating the educational gap between them and their middle-class and more affluent
peers.
Higher Education institutions could invest in low-income students and provide student mothers and student caregivers with adequate financial assistance in the form of childcare scholarships, no-cost evening and weekend childcare services, and provide a parent resource center (Polakow, Robinson, & Ziefert, 2014), as well as housing and food assistance. This would be a significant investment in building student parents and low-income students’ social capital and enhancing their academic capabilities. Programs like these could work towards closing the achievement gap and reducing low-income female students’ and student parents school absenteeism, which hinders their educational opportunities. Although none of the study’s participants are student parents, obtaining quality, affordable childcare is an educational barrier that over 26% of undergraduate student parents face—a critical issue when you consider 71% of the student parents are female (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014).

Increasing access to educational scholarships and federal Pell Grants reduces some of the economic barriers to post-secondary educational opportunities that most low-income students are challenged by due to lack of financial resources. Removing the economic barriers from low-income students affords them the opportunity to fully participate in their educational journeys.

Mentoring programs that target low-income, African American female college students are great opportunities to help build social capital and establish meaningful relationships with successful, high-achieving, African American female role models while structuring social contacts and networks that can serve as future resources and provide opportunities for attainment of academic and self-efficacy skills. Further, participation in cultural and social groups offers leadership skill building and the development of interpersonal skills, the onset of self-efficacy. Low-income, African American females can benefit from participation in these group activities and building and maintaining trusting relationships (e.g., mentor/mentee), which are all
components of academic optimism and promote student achievement. In addition, faculty development centers and student service offices could play an essential role in building an inclusive campus community. Through workshops for faculty development and by developing a range of student service activities, they can facilitate a heightened awareness and sensitivity to the challenges that low-income first-year student encounter as they navigate their way through innumerable obstacles to their success.

The low-income, African American female students in this study all experienced a compilation of social, financial, educational, familial, and community struggles on their educational journeys. Along their educational paths they have gained valuable and supportive relationships with significant people, who have assisted and guided them towards the promised land of educational attainment—a four-year university degree. The study participants all demonstrated remarkable resilience and persistence, attributes that emerged as essential components of their academic optimism. They shared their hopes and dreams of crossing their “River Jordan,” and their belief in the transformative power of a college education and its promise of economic opportunity and financial stability. Their honesty and clarity of voice has made this research project into more than I could have ever hoped for or imagined. I hope that as they cross over their River Jordan, they realize all of their hopes and dreams for a better life and I will forever be grateful for all that they have taught and shared with me in my dissertation research journey.
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Appendix A: Chapter 4 – Participant Profiles

**Eva** - is a 19-year-old, African American female college student working a full-time job while attending community college in southeastern Michigan. She is the only child of her mother and father.

**Carla** - is a 20-year-old community college student. She is the youngest member of her family and works full-time. She has three older siblings, one sister and two brothers. She works full-time and previously attended a four-year university.

**Halle** - is a 19-year-old, African American college student; she has a maturity that is unusual for her age. Halle is the youngest of her mother’s two children and the oldest of her father’s four children. She works full-time, while attending community college in the same small college town; where she previously attended a four-year university.

**Pam** – is an 18-year-old African American community college student and the big sister to her little 9-year-old brother. She works as a secretary at her father’s used car lot and is searching for an internship at a hospital to determine if physical therapy is the right career choice for her.

**Nikki** - is a 19-year-old, African American female college student, who attends a community college in southeastern Michigan. She has a nine-year-old brother with autism and is his caretaker in the evenings while her mother is at work. She currently babysits other latch key children to earn spending money.
Appendix B: Chapter 5 – Participant Profiles

**Brooke** – is a 19-year-old African American college student who is attending a four-year university in southeastern Michigan. She has a younger sister who is 16 and a high school sophomore. Brooke and her sister lived with their great-grandmother for most of their elementary school years.

**Mimi** – is an 18-year-old, African American female college student. Mimi has two sisters, one younger and one older, and an older brother. They all lived with their great grandparents. Mimi attends a four-year university in southeastern Michigan. She earns money thru work-study job at her university.

**Lisa** – is an 18-year-old African American female college student attending a four-year university in southeastern Michigan. Lisa has three other siblings, two older sisters, 37 and 33 and a 14-year-old brother. She earns money thru work-study job at her university.

**Olivia** – Olivia is an 18-year-old, African American college student working part-time while she attends a four-year university in southeastern Michigan. She is the second oldest of seven children of a single mother.
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

QUALITATIVE STUDY:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ACADEMIC LIVES.

Are you a first-year African American female student receiving a Pell-grant or other forms of financial aid? If you are, I would love to interview you about your college experience.

I am a doctoral student at Eastern Michigan University and I am interested in learning about your experiences and the challenges and barriers you have faced, and the successes you have experienced.

If you are interested in volunteering for an interview, please contact me (see below).

African American low-income, first-year, female college students needed for qualitative study.

IF INTERESTED, PLEASE CONTACT CRISTAL NICHOLS
Eastern Michigan University Doctoral Student @
(313) 205-1765 | cnicho20@emich.edu |

Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee
UISRC Protocol Number: 685840-1
Study Approval Dates: 12/15/14 – 12/15/15
Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter

RESEARCH @ EMU

UHSRC Determination: EXPEDITED INITIAL APPROVAL

DATE: December 16, 2014

TO: Cristal Nichols
Eastern Michigan University

Re: UHSRC: # 685840-1
Category: Expedited
Approval Date: December 15, 2014
Expiration Date: December 15, 2015

Title: Crossing Jordan: An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of Low-income African American Females Students and their Perceptions of their Academic Lives

Your research project, entitled Crossing Jordan: An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of Low-income African American Females Students and their Perceptions of their Academic Lives, has been approved in accordance with all applicable federal regulations.

This approval included the following:

1. Enrollment of 20 subjects to participate in the approved protocol.
2. Use of the following study measures: First Interview Questions; Second Interview Questions; Third Interview Questions
3. Use of the following stamped recruitment materials: Email script and Qualitative study flyer
4. Use of the stamped: Consent to participate in a research study

Renewals: This approval is valid for one year and expires on December 15, 2015. If you plan to continue your study beyond December 15, 2015, you must submit a Continuing Review Form by November 15, 2015 to ensure the approval does not lapse.

Modifications: All changes must be approved prior to implementation. If you plan to make any minor changes, you must submit a Minor Modification Form. For any changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a Human Subjects Approval Request Form. These forms are available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Problems: All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects or change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an Event Report form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Follow-up: If your Expedited research project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office requires a new Human Subjects Approval Request Form prior to approving a continuation beyond three years.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.
Sincerely,

Jennifer Keiman Fritz, PhD
Chair
University Human Subjects Review Committee
Appendix E: IRB Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of the Project: Crossing Jordan: An Exploration of the Educational Experiences of Low-income African American Female Students and their Perceptions of their Academic Lives

Principal Investigator: Cristal Nichols, Doctoral Student, Eastern Michigan University

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

I invite you to be part of a qualitative research study about low-income, first-year, African American female college students’ perceptions of their academic lives, including their educational histories. I am a doctoral student and this research study is my dissertation research project.

If you agree to be part of the research study, I will ask you to participate in two 60 minute interviews in a public place (e.g., college study room, public library). I will secure a private space, either in a study room in a public library or in the university or college libraries where we will meet to ensure your privacy during the interview process. You may also be asked to participate in a third clarifying interview. Interviews will be conducted from December 2014 through April 2015. After the first two interviews, I may request, at your convenience, to accompany you to college for a day to observe your educational activities.

Benefits of Participation

There are no direct benefits to you. However, this research study will serve to identify facilitators and barriers African American female college students have encountered in their pursuit of postsecondary opportunities and may be beneficial for future postsecondary educational students.

Risks

There are no foreseeable risks.

Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee
UHSRC Protocol Number: 685840-1
Study Approval Dates: 12/15/14 – 12/15/15
Confidentiality

The results will be disseminated in my dissertation and future publications and/or presentations. However, results will be completely anonymous and no identifying information will be included. Your confidentiality will be protected at all times and a pseudonym will be used for your name and no identifying information will be disclosed about your university or community college. Your files, including transcribed audio-tapes, will be coded utilizing a pseudonym for the participant’s name and college and password protected ensuring confidentiality throughout the research process. The files will be destroyed after the dissertation is completed.

Storage of Data

The research advisor, dissertation committee members, and groups responsible for research oversight and I will be the only persons with access to the study participants’ files and they will be stored on my personal desktop computer, password protected and backed up on a flash drive device. After data analysis and completion of the research study, all files will be destroyed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer a question you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, you may discontinue without any penalty and your file will immediately be destroyed.

Contact Information

If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling your shadowing day, you may contact Cristal Nichols at cnicho20@emich.edu.

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee
UHSSRC Protocol Number: 685840-1
Study Approval Dates: 12/15/14 – 12/15/15
For information about your rights as a participant in research, you can contact the Eastern Michigan University Office of Research Compliance at 734-487-3090 or human.subjects@emich.edu.

Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study.

I agree to participate in the study.

_________________________________________ Printed Name

______________________________ Signature

Signature Date

Consent to be Audio/video Recorded

I agree to be audio/video recorded.

_________________________________________ Signature

Consent to be observed on my campus for a day

I agree to allow Cristal Nichols to accompany me on an agreed-upon day to my campus and allow her to observe me attending class and participating in educational activities

_________________________________________ Signature

Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee
UHSRC Protocol Number: 685840-1
Study Approval Dates: 12/15/14 – 12/15/15