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How African-American Community College Online Learners Succeed

Lynn Bailey Mackey
Illinois State University, lynnbmackey@yahoo.com

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141 Pages

Disparities in academic performance between African-American and White students are larger in online courses than in face-to-face courses. As online learning grows and students enroll in more online courses as a way of balancing school with work and family obligations, African-American enrollment in online courses threatens to exacerbate the population's already inequitable course success and college completion rates. To help improve the online academic achievement of African-American community college students, this qualitative study draws on interviews with 12 members of the population who completed online courses with passing grades. The study identifies the challenges students experienced in the online environment, the resources they used to overcome those challenges, and the strategies they used to succeed. The conceptual framework for this anti-deficit study is positive deviance. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that the students' major challenges were a lack of instructor presence, difficulty balancing multiple responsibilities, and having to develop self-directed learning skills. Resources included the internet, instructors, grit, jugaad, and academic motivators such as the desire to achieve social and economic mobility. Strategies for success included using time management and organizational skills to complete coursework, in addition to not taking difficult courses online. Recommendations to community colleges for improving success rates of Black online

learners include shifting from deficit thinking to equity thinking and considering how institutions can modify practices to redress inequities in Black collegians' course completion and graduation rates.

KEYWORDS: African-American students, anti-deficit, community colleges, online learning, positive deviance, student success

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LYNN BAILEY MACKEY

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LYNN BAILEY MACKEY

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Lydia Kyei-Blankson, Co-Chair

James C. Palmer, Co-Chair

Dianne C. Gardner Renn

Ryan Smith

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L.B.M.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Research Problem

The disparity between the academic performance of African-American and White students in traditional, face-to-face college courses also exists in online courses (Harrell & Bower, 2011; Moore et al., 2002; Salvo et al., 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). In fact, scholars have discovered that disparities in academic performance between the two racial groups are even larger in online courses than in face-to-face courses (Arroyo, 2010; Jaggars, 2013; Palacios & Wood, 2016; Salvo et al., 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). As online learning grows, more students enroll in online courses to balance school, work, and family obligations. African-American enrollment in online courses threatens to exacerbate the population's already inequitable course success and graduation rates when compared to their White counterparts (Arroyo, 2010; Jaggars, 2013; Salvo et al., 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Community colleges, which educate large numbers of African-American students who are academically disadvantaged (Jaggars, 2013; Strayhorn, 2010), must therefore learn how to improve online course success and graduation rates for their African-American students.

There is a dearth of literature on the experiences of African-American students taking online courses at community colleges (Kinyanjui, 2016; Merrills, 2010; Moore, 2014; Palacios & Wood, 2016). To help fill this gap, my study draws on interviews with African-American students who completed online courses with passing grades to identify the strategies they used to succeed in those classes. Understanding these strategies could help community colleges improve African-American students' online academic achievement and, as a result, their graduation rates. The research questions guiding the study include:

1. What were the challenges that African-American community college online learners experienced as they pursued online coursework?
2. What resources were at the disposal of African-American community college online learners to help them overcome the challenges they experienced while taking online classes?
3. What strategies did African-American community college online learners employ to succeed in online courses?

For this study, the terms "Black" and "African-American" were utilized interchangeably to describe Black people (in this case students) who pursue online curricular post-secondary work.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is positive deviance, which shines a light on those who overcome great odds to succeed and who therefore deviate from the more common pattern of failure experienced by others who face the same challenges. For African-American students, positive deviance offers a counternarrative to deficit thinking, which unfairly attributes the achievement gap to traits and actions of African-American students themselves rather than to the systemic racism characteristic of American society in general and colleges in particular. The following paragraphs outline how deficit thinking affects the African-American student experience and the importance of pursuing an anti-deficit framework for this study. Finally, this section of the chapter asserts the relevance of utilizing a positive deviance framework, noting how it contributes to the meaning making aim of the study.

Deficit Thinking and the Importance of an Anti-Deficit Framework

Bensimon (2005) explained that for minoritized populations, such as African-American students, (who have historically been excluded and discriminated against in higher education) faculty, staff, and administrators often attribute students' inequitable educational outcomes to cultural stereotypes, lack of motivation, and failure to engage inside and outside of the classroom. Valencia (1997) called this phenomenon, in which historically underserved and underrepresented students are blamed for the disparities in their academic performance, *deficit thinking*.

Wood and Palmer (2015) explained that deficit thinking occurs among faculty who embrace stereotypes regarding Black students' intellectual abilities and believe they are incapable of high academic achievement. The researchers stated that the racism Black students experience at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and the stigmatization of their presence as unqualified students who were admitted solely because of affirmative action or athletic prowess, constantly threaten their sense of belonging and their academic achievement. The racism that the students experience stems in part from deficit thinking.

Harper (2012) argued that deficit thinking is operational at many postsecondary institutions where faculty, staff, and administrators believe it is the student's responsibility to engage with the institution, both academically and socially. According to this model, if students do not choose to study, seek tutoring, initiate out-of-class interactions with faculty, or join student organizations, they should be blamed for the resulting low grades and attrition that follows. However, Wood's (2012) study of African-American male community college students found that stereotype threat prevents some Black students from participating in class discussions and asking faculty members questions about instructional material. It also prevents these students from seeking out tutoring and other support services, as they are afraid of confirming the racist

stereotypes their White peers, professors, and administrators might hold about them. Wood (2012) stated,

> Discussions with Black male students reveal a perception that others (e.g., faculty, peers, etc.) view them as academically inferior. In fact, when describing an ambivalence to participate in class, Black males repeatedly use words such as "stupid," "ignorant," and "dumb" to depict how others, particularly faculty, would regard them *if* they engaged. (p. 31)

Harper (2012) offered that, because African-American students may have a deep apprehension to engage, higher education leaders must shift the onus of engagement from students to institutions. The author asserted that instead of institutions asking what is wrong with students and why they don't engage, educators should, instead, explore their own shortcomings and consider what faculty, staff, and administrators can do to modify their practices in ways that help students feel comfortable and inspired to engage. Harper (2012) further argued that this course of action would ensure a more equitable distribution of the benefits that accompany student engagement, namely academic achievement, persistence, and graduation. Bensimon (2005) asserted that Harper's emphasis on shifting the onus of engagement from students to institutions is consistent with what she calls *equity thinking*. The author explained that while deficit thinking blames minoritized students for inequitable educational outcomes, equity thinking holds institutions and systems accountable for producing inequitable educational outcomes. Equity thinking focuses on the institution's responsibility to reduce inequitable educational outcomes by considering how racial stereotypes and institutionalized racism, as well as racialized policies and practices, negatively impact students' academic achievement (Bensimon, 2005).

Harper (2012) explained that deficit thinking proliferates not only in educational practices, but in published academic research regarding Black student achievement as well. Harper (2012) called on scholars to choose anti-deficit conceptual frameworks for their studies of Black student academic achievement. Anti-deficit frameworks are those that shift the way achievement is studied by focusing on the population's strengths and assets such as resourcefulness and resilience, instead of any perceived deficits such as laziness or disengagement. Anti-deficit studies raise inquiries regarding what students do right, rather than what they do wrong. Harper (2012) developed the anti-deficit achievement framework (ADAF) for a national study of over 200 successful Black male collegians at 42 postsecondary institutions across the country. All the students had a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) or higher, student leadership experience, a record of campus engagement, relationships with administrators and faculty, and were recipients of academic awards. Harper (2012) interviewed the men to discover the strategies they used to succeed in college. The researcher asserted that more anti-deficit research is needed. Such studies provide a counter-narrative to the deficit-oriented studies that claim that Black collegians are unmotivated, disengaged, and intellectually inferior. He further argued that anti-deficit studies provide instructive insights into how Black collegians achieve success, which could inform institutional practices to improve the population's graduation rates (Harper, 2012).

Positive Deviance

The anti-deficit conceptual framework for this study is positive deviance (PD). Positive deviance is an asset-based approach to solving intractable problems by employing strategies used by *positive deviants* (PDs)—individuals who discover uncommon attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that enable them to achieve success despite the challenges and barriers they face

(Pascale et al., 2010). PDs are statistical outliers whose success, against all odds, deviates from the norm in a positive way. PDs become successful in the same environment as their peers while experiencing similar challenges and having access to the same or fewer resources as their peers.

The authors of the definitive book regarding positive deviance, Pascale et al. (2010), explained that PDs are usually unaware that their actions depart from the norm. However, once their unique strategies for success are identified and shared with their peers, many lives can be transformed. To address a problem, PD researchers employ the PD methodology, which involves (a) defining the problem and identifying the desired outcome, (b) determining the existence of PDs and interviewing them to discover the strategies they used to overcome the problem, and (c) designing an action plan for disseminating findings to impacted individuals so they may replicate the PDs' success (Pascale et al., 2010).

The term positive deviance was introduced in the nutrition literature of the 1960s, and further developed in a 1990 book regarding child nutrition, edited by a group of Tufts University professors (Positive Deviance Collaborative, 2017). Later in the 1990s, Jerry and Monique Sternin operationalized the PD concept to successfully eradicate childhood malnutrition in Vietnam (Pascale et al., 2010). Over 60% of children under the age of five from poverty-stricken families were malnourished in that country. After weighing over 2,000 children in several Vietnamese villages, the Sternins interviewed the families of the well-nourished children, the positive deviants, determining that their parents fed them small shrimp and crab from the paddy fields, and sweet potato greens. These food items were available to all of the families in the village; however, they were deemed by most to be taboo or inappropriate for children to eat. In addition, the parents of well-nourished children fed their children smaller meals three to four times a day instead of the typical large meals only twice a day. The children's mothers also

actively fed the children to ensure no food was wasted, instead of simply placing the food in front of them and leaving them to eat, with little supervision. The village community then devised a plan in which the families of the well-nourished children taught the rest of the community how to employ these strategies with their own children (Pascale et al., 2010).

In 2001, a grant funded by the Ford Foundation led to the establishment of the Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI) at Tufts University, where the Sternins worked to expand the use of the PD framework to other sectors such as public health, health care, education, child protection and governance (Positive Deviance Collaborative, 2017). The PDI was dissolved in 2014 and the Positive Deviance Collaborative, an international initiative, replaced it in 2017.

Although PD has been used to study and improve student retention in education (Pascale et al., 2010), no published studies have employed PD to study online learning. This study fills this gap. Indeed, PD is an appropriate framework for the current study as it meets the criteria for PD studies, namely that (a) the problem is concrete and does not have a technical solution, (b) the problem is intractable, and (c) positive deviants are believed to exist (Pascale et al., 2010). The inequities in course success and graduation rates for African-American community college online learners, when compared to their White counterparts, are a well-documented problem that does not have a technical solution. Pascale et al. (2010) offered, as an example of a problem with a technical solution, the disease smallpox—a health problem for which vaccination is a technical solution. The research problem examined in the current study is complex and difficult to solve, involving systemic and structural barriers, such as racism and deficit thinking. Finally, there are African-American community college online learners who have been successful course takers. For example, in their study of student retention among 1,915 online learners at a large urban

community college, Moore et al. (2002) found that 43% of Black students earned grades of "C" or better (although this percentage was 67% for students in other ethnic groups).

Statement of Positionality

The journey to my interest in researching African-American community college online learners began in 2004. After working in the Multicultural Student Affairs Office in graduate school and completing my graduate degrees, I became a TRIO Student Support Services case manager at a Chicagoland community college. I wanted to serve community college students because they reminded me of myself as an undergraduate: a first-generation college student from a working-class family who, given a lack of educational opportunities in one of Chicago's most impoverished neighborhoods, struggled to achieve college readiness. I wanted to help community college students the way so many college administrators helped me during my undergraduate tenure.

The dean of student services at the community college asked me to serve on a committee to help improve graduation rates for Latinx college students. It was a new initiative at the college called *Project Éxito*. During the first committee meeting, the committee chair reviewed statistics on Latinx graduation rates, compared to those of other racial and ethnic groups. I immediately noticed that, while the graduation rates for Latinx students were lower than those of White and Asian students, African-American students had the lowest graduation rates of all racial and ethnic groups presented.

While it bothered me that a formal committee had not been established at the college to consider how students with the worst graduation rates might be helped, it bothered me even more that there was a significant disparity between the completion rates of White and African-American students. I knew success for Black collegians was possible, even under challenging

circumstances, because I had succeeded. What I did not know was that a compendium of systemic and institutional barriers conspired to inhibit Black students' success, particularly at PWIs. Nevertheless, I was determined to help reduce the disparity in graduation rates for Black students. I was busy pursuing my education for many years, and I did not realize that so many African-American students were being neglected. I knew several of my Black friends in college left the institution. Still, I did not realize how many African-American collegians were unable to obtain their postsecondary credentials until I saw the statistics. I identified with the students included in the statistics. I felt that, because I earned college degrees, I was responsible for helping other Black students achieve their educational goals in college.

When I began my doctoral studies, I knew my dissertation topic would involve improving retention and graduation rates for Black community college students. However, I had not narrowed my topic more specifically. That changed when I read an article by famed student departure theorist Vincent Tinto (2011). The scholar stated that the classroom is where higher education professionals can make the most significant impact on student retention. The idea was revolutionary to me. Having worked as a student affairs professional, my experience attested that the executive leadership of the college always held student development departments responsible for improving retention. From my perspective, the potential impact of academic affairs on retention efforts was scarcely considered.

After serving with TRIO for several years, I became a full-time faculty member at the college. Eventually, I began teaching online classes. I enjoyed it and understood that online learning would be a significant component of higher education in the future. I decided to narrow my dissertation topic by combining online learning with my interest in Black community college student retention.

While reading course assignments during my doctoral program, I encountered a debate among scholars (Harris & Wood, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012) regarding whether Tinto's (1993) theory was an appropriate reference for studies about community college students and students of color. I read a plethora of literature about Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and had decided to use it for my study, until I was informed of the theoretical controversy. One of the articles I read (Harris & Wood, 2013) recommended that scholars interested in studying retention and completion among students of color consider employing one of what they deemed culturally relevant frameworks—chief among them was Harper's (2012) ADAF.

While reading about ADAF, I was immediately captured by the framework. I saw a reflection of my experience in the successful Black male collegians Harper (2012) interviewed for his study. I found it appealing to explore the strategies which helped students like me. During a seminar on equity and justice at my place of employment, I learned about the PD framework. I found that, although ADAF piqued my interest in interviewing students with whom I had a lot in common, the description of PD as a conceptual framework was comprehensive. Also, the PD concept was aligned with the objectives of my study, and PD methodology provided the tools that would help guide my investigation of how Black community college online learners achieved success.

Importance of the Topic

Xu and Jaggars (2014) conducted a study of over 40,000 community and technical college students in Washington State. They found that, although all of the students had higher course grades and rates of course persistence in face-to-face classes than online classes, those who placed into developmental education courses or had a GPA lower than 3.0 experienced a much larger online performance gap when compared to students who were not academically

disadvantaged. In addition, African-American students experienced a much larger online performance gap when compared to their non-Black peers. For example, fixed-effects estimates measuring gaps in performance in face-to-face versus online performance revealed that for standardized grades in online classes, Asian students had a coefficient of -0.097 while Black students had a coefficient of -0.230, more than twice that of Asian students. In other words, African-American students performed twice as poorly in online classes when compared to Asian students. Thus, grades in online classes were significantly correlated with race. Other scholars have corroborated these findings, demonstrating that the gap between academic performance in online and face-to-face courses is larger for African-American students than for non-Black students (Arroyo, 2010; Jaggars, 2013; Palacios & Wood, 2015; Salvo et al., 2017). Xu and Jaggars (2014) put the findings into context when they stated, "This is troubling from an equity perspective...it would imply that the continued expansion of online learning could strengthen rather than ameliorate educational inequity" (p. 651). Hence, the significance of the current study includes its potential to identify strategies for improving the performance of African-American community college students in online courses and, as a consequence, for reducing gaps in retention and completion rates between Black and non-Black students.

This study aimed to uncover those strategies through interviews with African-American community college students who have achieved success in online courses, a mode of instruction that continues to grow in higher education. High attrition rates threaten to exacerbate low college completion rates and educational inequity for African-American students. Informed of the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that yielded success for students from the same population and who experienced the same challenges, community colleges will receive insights that will improve course performance rates for African-American online learners.

Limitations and Assumptions

A potential limitation of the study is the way that success in online courses is defined. It is defined as students earning grades of "C" or better. Other studies on Black community college online learners have defined success in the same way (Palacios & Wood, 2015). However, this definition of success disregards students who meet other meaningful indicators of success such as achieving the learning outcomes of the course or engaging with course content, instructors, or classmates in a way that accomplishes their personal goals.

Another limitation of this study is researcher bias or subjectivity, which may impact the research questions, data collection, data analysis, and study results. Galdas (2017) defined researcher bias as any influence that distorts the results of the study. He explained that a key concern regarding qualitative researchers is that steps should be taken to ensure that their work is not simply rhetoric that reflects the researcher's opinions and personal agenda. He acknowledges that the qualitative researcher is an essential component of his or her work and that it is impossible and undesirable to separate the researcher from the research process. Consequently, he stated that instead of managing or eliminating bias, qualitative researchers should critically examine their preconceptions about the study results. They should also be transparent about how data was collected, analyzed, and presented (Galdas, 2017).

In an effort to follow Galdas' (2017) advice, I admit that this study is deeply personal for me. I explained in my statement of positionality how it bothers me that Black students have the lowest graduation rates compared to White and Latinx students. I also explained that I was academically disadvantaged and nonetheless graduated from college. I believe that because I achieved my goal, so many other Black students can, too. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to produce equitable educational outcomes, such as graduation, for Black students.

My hope is that this study will provide insight into how community colleges can improve online course success rates for African-American students. Throughout the study, I will attempt to remain aware of my positionality and its role in my interactions with the study subjects and my interpretations of their observations about taking and successfully completing online courses.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter draws on key literature to provide a context for the study of successful African-American community college online learners, building the foundation necessary for readers to understand the educational inequities that African-American collegians experience. It also demonstrates how the growth of online learning, combined with the modality's high attrition rates, threatens to exacerbate disparities in the academic success of Black students and those in other ethnic groups. The chapter begins with enrollment and completion statistics for African-American collegians compared to other ethnicities, followed by a discussion regarding the growth of online learning in higher education. The chapter concludes with a discussion of attrition in online learning and theoretical frameworks that may explain the causes of student withdrawal from online courses.

Description of African-American Collegians

The challenges African-American students experience begin with their enrollment at postsecondary institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018), the college enrollment rate, defined as the percentage of young adults (18-24 years old) enrolled as undergraduates or graduates in 2- or 4-year institutions increased from 31% in 2000 to 36% in 2016 for Black students. However, Black students still have the lowest enrollment rates compared to Asian, White, and Latinx students (NCES, 2018). For example, the college enrollment rate in 2016 was 58% for Asian students, 42% for White students, and 39% for Latinx students (NCES, 2018).

Strayhorn (2010) argued that socioeconomic status (SES) is often a determining factor in college enrollment rates. According to the author, while approximately 87% of high school students from high-income families enroll in a postsecondary institution immediately following

graduation, this is true for only 53% of low-income high school students. Strayhorn posited that for students who face more than one challenging circumstance or intersecting oppressions, such as being both African-American and economically disadvantaged, enrollment and college success rates decline accordingly.

Strayhorn (2010) also explained that African-American students who enroll in college are concentrated at community colleges and broad-access public universities that often do not, in contrast to private and more selective institutions, have the resources needed to help students succeed. For example, 39% of Black undergraduates in 2013 were enrolled at a public, nonprofit 2-year institution, compared to 35% of White students. In the same year, 13% of Black students were enrolled at public, 4-year research institutions compared to 20% of White students (NCES, 2016a). In addition, Black students are overrepresented at private, for-profit 4-year schools, which frequently have lower graduation rates, higher student loan debt amounts, and a lower level of expenditures on teaching and learning than nonprofit institutions (Mettler, 2014). In 2013, 12% of Black students were enrolled at private, for-profit 4-year schools, while only 5% of White students were enrolled at these institutions (NCES, 2016a). As a consequence, the graduation rates of African-American students are the lowest among all racial/ethnic groups (NCES, 2016a). In 2014, the 6-year graduation rate was 71% for Asian students, 63% for White students, 54% for Latinx students, and 41% for Black students (NCES, 2017).

While these statistics clarify the inequity in educational outcomes for African-American students, the difference in educational outcomes between African-American male and female students is frequently noted in the literature (Strayhorn, 2010). Although gender differences in educational attainment exist across all racial and ethnic groups, with women having higher graduation rates than men, the gender gap is greatest between African-American men and

women (NCES, 2017). For example, in 2016, the college enrollment rate for White women and men was 44% and 40%, respectively. This compares to 39% for Black women and 33% for Black men (NCES, 2017). Similarly, in 2014, while the 6-year graduation rate was 57% for Latinas and 49% for Latinos, the rate was 45% for Black women and 35% for Black men (NCES, 2017).

Because of these gaps between Black men and women collegians, a large share of the literature on Black students explores the experiences of Black men and the strategies that can improve their educational outcomes. The importance of conducting research with the aim of achieving equity for Black male collegians is undisputed, given the fact that their educational outcomes are the lowest among both racial/ethnic and gender groups. However, focusing research primarily on Black men to the exclusion of Black women has had the unintended consequence of silencing the voices of Black female collegians. Black women experience their own unique challenges as they sit at the intersection of racial and gender oppression.

The Growth of Online Learning in Higher Education

Lehman and Conceição (2014) explained that online learning in higher education has grown significantly. Students juggling work and family responsibilities have sought more flexible learning options, and institutions have pursued additional revenue streams that do not require physical space. According to the NCES data, the percentage of undergraduates taking at least one distance education course grew from 8% to 20% from 2000 to 2008 (Radford, 2011). Seaman et al. (2018) stated that, as of 2016, over 6.3 million college and university students had taken at least one distance education course. This statistic, which includes both students who take a combination of online and face-to-face courses as well as students who take online courses exclusively, represented almost 32% of all higher education enrollments.

Seaman et al. (2018) defined distance education or online courses as instruction delivered to students through technology (such as the internet) in ways that allow instructors, who are separated from students by distance, to facilitate regular and substantive interaction with students, either synchronously or asynchronously. The authors stated that the number of students taking online courses increased by 17%, or 933,175 students, from 2012 to 2016. The growth of distance education enrollment is occurring at a time when overall enrollment at postsecondary institutions continues to decline. Seaman et al. (2018) stated that fewer students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities each year from 2012 to 2016. According to the authors, the higher education industry lost 3.8 % or 804,000 students from 2012 to 2016 (Seaman et al., 2018).

Xu and Jaggars (2014) asserted that online education has grown particularly fast at the nation's community colleges. The authors explained that the large population of nontraditional students present at these institutions is more likely to be challenged by full-time work responsibilities, child-care needs, and the cost of transportation (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). These challenges make asynchronous learning opportunities more attractive. Radford (2011) concurred, stating that enrollment in distance education courses, as determined by the NCES, is most common at public, 2-year colleges where 22% of the students choose this modality. NCES data have also demonstrated that students who are age 30 and older, who are married, who have children, and who have full-time jobs are more likely than other students to take advantage of distance education courses (Radford, 2011). In addition, Salvo (2017) stated that the demand for online courses at community colleges outpaces the demand for traditional, on-campus classes. Finally, Bambara et al. (2009) stated that in 2005, community colleges enrolled more than half of all online learners nationwide.

According to Merrills (2010), the Federal Communications Commission held that the percentage of Black students who enroll in online classes (37%) is higher than the national average (26%). The NCES (2016b) reported that, during the 2011-2012 academic year, the percentage of Black undergraduates who took at least one online class (32.7%) was almost the same as their White counterparts (33.5%). However, the percentage of Black undergraduates enrolled only in online courses (10.7%) was higher than the percentage of White, Latinx, or Asian undergraduates who enrolled only in online courses (9%, 5.5%, and 4.2%, respectively). In addition, the percentage of Black undergraduates enrolled in online degree programs was higher than all the aforementioned ethnic groups. Over 9% of Black undergraduates were enrolled in online degree programs, whereas the percentages of White, Latinx, and Asian students were 6.8%, 4.3%, and 2.9%, respectively.

To put these numbers into context and to unearth inequities, Salvo et al. (2017) asserted that the majority of Black students who are enrolled only in online courses or in online degree programs attend private, for-profit institutions. As previously stated, Black students are overrepresented at for-profit institutions where there are higher rates of student loan debt and lower graduation rates than at nonprofit institutions (Mettler, 2014). However, Kinyanjui (2016) explained that Black students prefer online learning to traditional classes because the convenience allows them to work full-time and take care of their children while completing course-work. The author stated that this preference is so strong that Black students are willing to pay a premium to complete online degree programs at for-profit institutions. Merrills (2010) reported that, at the University of Phoenix, an online for-profit institution, 30% of its 420,700 students are African-American.

Attrition in Online Learning

While the growth of online learning has improved access to higher education for many students, poor success rates in online courses have hampered students' educational progress. Studies have found that attrition rates in online courses are higher than in face-to-face courses and that grades in online courses are lower (Bambara et al., 2009; Davidson, 2017; Doe et al., 2017; Gaytan, 2015; Jaggars, 2013; Moore, 2014; Moore et al., 2002; Randolph & Crawford, 2013; Salvo, 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014; Yalof, 2012; Yukselturk & Inan, 2006). Xu and Jaggars (2014) stated that while studies conducted with elite university students have found few differences in outcomes when comparing face-to-face and online student performances, studies of community college students have found that students perform more poorly in online courses. The researchers, as noted in Chapter 1, launched a study of over 40,000 community college students in Washington state who took both online and face-to-face classes. The study compared the persistence rates and course grades of students in the two instructional modalities.

Xu and Jaggars (2014) found that all student types analyzed (including gender, age, previous academic performance, and ethnicity) had lower persistence rates and grades in online classes than they did in face-to-face classes. The average persistence rate in on-campus classes was 94% compared to 91% in online classes. The average grade in on-campus classes was 2.97 on a 4.0 scale, compared to 2.77 in online classes. In addition, Jaggars (2013) studied online course performance at two statewide community college systems and found that failure and withdrawal rates were 8 to 13 percentage points higher in online courses than in on-campus courses. The researchers also found that students who completed online courses were up to 6% less likely than students in on-campus courses to earn grades of "C" or better (Jaggars, 2013).

Causes of Attrition in Distance Education

To improve student success for online learners, scholars have developed theoretical frameworks to explain the causes of attrition in the digital environment. Randolph and Crawford (2013) credited Kember (1989) with building the first theoretical model of attrition for distance education. Kember (1989) based his model on Tinto's theory of student departure but modified it so it was appropriate for the distance learning environment. Kember's (1989) model held that educational background, levels of income, goal commitment, work obligations, and ability to integrate studying into one's lifestyle influence attrition in distance education. Galusha (1997) asserted that students' isolation, inexperience with distance learning, and lack of technical support are factors that lead to attrition. In addition, the author cited inadequate faculty training in course development and technology as barriers to student retention in distance education (Galusha, 1997).

Berge and Huang (2004) also constructed a model for student retention in the online environment. The authors posited that student ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic skills, prior educational experiences, self-efficacy, organizational skills, motivation, satisfaction with the course, and the institution's response to student needs all play a role in online student retention (Berge & Huang, 2004). The authors' framework for student retention was constructed by reviewing previous research and theoretical studies. The model emphasizes personal variables, institutional variables, circumstantial variables, and the interaction among them to shape a multidimensional framework that explains the lack of student persistence in online courses. Rovai (2002) held that creating a sense of community in online courses can improve online student retention by decreasing feelings of isolation and psychological distance in the e-learning environment.

Studies investigating the reasons students withdraw from online courses validate aspects of the theoretical frameworks for online student attrition. For example, Moore et al. (2002) conducted a study of online student retention at a large community college in the Northeast. Study participants mentioned several reasons for withdrawing from or not successfully completing online courses, including financial problems, the difficulty of the courses, feeling alone or not part of the class, technical difficulties, not knowing where to go for help, and trouble balancing work, family and school obligations. In addition, Hart (2012), in her literature review of online course retention factors, found that student satisfaction with online learning, motivation, a sense of belonging to the learning community, and increased interaction with the instructor were keys to student persistence and success.

There are some commonalities among the theoretical models that explain the causes of attrition in online courses. Multiple models include elements of the following among the causes of attrition: socioeconomic status, trouble balancing school, work and family obligations, time management, organizational skills, academic skills, institutional response to student needs (via faculty training in technology and the need to increase interaction with students online or otherwise) technical difficulties, and isolation. The themes in this summary may very well emerge in the analysis of the data in the current study of positive deviants and how they overcome obstacles to success, some of which may have been highlighted in previous research.

Review of Prior Research

Scholars agree that few studies have investigated the experiences of African-American online learners (Kinyanjui, 2016; Merrills, 2010; Moore, 2014; Palacios & Wood, 2015). However, the extant literature on the topic is divided into two categories: conversations about the inequities in academic performance between Black and non-minoritized students, and the causes

of attrition and performance disparities in online course performance among Black online learners. Among the conversations regarding the causes of attrition and performance disparities are discussions regarding the roles played by academic disadvantage, failure to accommodate Black student learning styles, and the digital divide in pushing Black students out of online classes. However, no previous studies of Black students in online courses have examined community college online learners who overcome the many challenges to successful course completion. The dearth of information about these positive deviants and the mechanisms they employ to achieve success comprise a significant gap in the literature.

Racial Inequities in Online Learning Student Success

For almost 20 years, scholars have understood that being Black is an attribute that could predict performance in online courses. Examining the grades of 4,000 students who registered for online courses over a 5-year period at a northeastern community college, Moore et al. (2002) found that 43% of African-American students received grades of "C" or better in those courses, compared to 67% of non-Black students. Employing an even larger database consisting of grades earned by 41,194 students in 498,613 courses at Washington state's community and technical colleges from 2004 to 2009, Xu and Jaggars (2014) compared face-to-face and online course performance rates by ethnicity among other demographic variables. The authors defined the difference between students' online and face-to-face performances as the *online performance gap*. The authors found that, although all students in the study experienced an online performance gap, Black students saw a wider gap than their counterparts. Black students typically had lower grades and persistence rates than their peers in face-to-face classes, but the authors found that those decrements in performance were exacerbated in the online environment (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). For example, the study found that, for standardized grades in online

classes, Asian students had a coefficient of -0.097 while Black students had a coefficient of -0.230, which was more than twice that of Asian students. Finally, Jaggars et al. (2013a) found similar results for online versus on-campus grades between Black and White students. Drawing on studies conducted in two states by the Community College Research Center, they noted that White students earned an average grade of 3.0 in face-to-face classes while Black students earned a 2.8. For online courses, White students earned an average grade of 2.7 while Black students earned a 2.2.

The implications of these studies are stark. As Xu and Jaggars (2014) aptly pointed out, if online course success does not improve for students who are negatively impacted by the modality, the growth of online learning will serve only to increase inequities and not as a democratizing force in higher education. Arroyo (2010) agreed, stating, "Contrary to those who tout online education as the great leveler in higher education with the promise of granting access to one and all, what we actually have is the recipe for a widened achievement gap…" (p. 38).

Academic Disadvantage

Students who are not college ready, whose placement tests at community colleges direct them to remedial courses, or whose grade point averages fall below an identified threshold for success (2.0, 3.0, etc.) are often referred to as *academically underprepared* students (Davidson, 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Though the term academically underprepared is commonly used, it may be viewed as deficit-oriented, emphasizing that students are responsible for preparing themselves for college-level course work and, as a consequence, have only themselves to blame if they fail to do so. The terms *academically disadvantaged*, *academically underserved*, and *academically disserved* are used interchangeably in this study to acknowledge the structural factors (e.g., racism) that cause many Black students to arrive at college without the full set of

academic skills needed to succeed in postsecondary courses. The aforementioned terms also highlight that many African-American students have been deprived of opportunities to receive a college preparatory education, often because they are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Darling-Hammond (2005) argued that students in high-income K-12 school districts are exposed to a wide array of courses and more advanced curricula. She stated that the education these students receive extends beyond basic skills to focus on critical thinking, problem solving, and analytical and writing skills that prepare them for college and careers in a knowledge-based economy. In comparison, Darling-Hammond (2005) held that curricula in low-income schools often focus only on basic skills that prepare students for low-wage jobs.

African-American students are more likely to be academically disadvantaged than their White peers. According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2010), 46% of Black collegians in the 2007-2008 school year took remedial courses. Cochran et al. (2013) found, in their study of retention in online learning, that Black students were more likely than students in other ethnic/racial groups to have a cumulative grade point average below 3.0. The authors hypothesized that the students' limited academic skill levels led to the lower grades they received in online classes. Findings from several empirical studies are consistent with those of Cochran et al. (2013). For example, Davidson (2017), in a study of predictors of community college online learner success, found that students who placed into remedial courses were more likely to fail online classes and less likely to complete them than students who had a strong record of academic success. In addition, Moore et al. (2002) found that first-time students who were academically disadvantaged had a lower likelihood of receiving online grades of "C" or better when compared to first-time students who were academically well served. The researchers found that 44% of academically disadvantaged students earned grades of "C" or better, while 66% of

academically advantaged students did so (Moore et al., 2002). Finally, in addition to Xu and Jaggars' (2014) finding that Black students experienced a wider online performance gap than their peers, the authors also found that academically underserved students suffered the same fate.

Because academically underserved students are more likely to experience lower success rates in the online environment, Salvo et al. (2017) asserted that online learning may inhibit educational progress for these students. The authors argued that one of the reasons academically disserved students are less likely to be successful in online courses lies in the fact that most of these classes are heavily dependent upon reading as the primary mode of instruction and writing as the primary skill needed to complete course assignments; instructional methods such as video or phone conferencing are rarely employed. The authors added that, while reading and writing are core competencies for online course success, only 21% of African-American high school graduates have college-level reading skills (Salvo et al., 2017).

Learning Styles

In addition to African-American students being less likely to have the reading skills required for online course success, Merrills (2010) offered that reading and writing may not be the preferred modes of learning for the population. Her study of Black online learners found that students had difficulty understanding and completing long reading assignments. Merrills (2010) explained that African-Americans hail from an oral tradition of learning (e.g., storytelling) and suggested that the heavy emphasis on reading and writing in online courses may put Black students at a disadvantage. Arroyo (2010) agreed and stated that Black students learn best "where there is high contact, heavy dialogue (verbal and non-verbal) [and] deep community" (p. 37), a concept he refers to as *field dependence*. According to Arroyo (2010), empirical studies demonstrate that learning styles differ by race. He stated that if instructors fail to honor those

differences in their pedagogy, students' academic performances will suffer. The author further stated that the online learning environment is characterized by *field independence*, including traits such as depersonalization, autonomy, isolation, and competition, which are in direct conflict with the learning preferences of Black and other field dependent students. Arroyo (2010) advocated the modification of online courses to make them more welcoming for field dependent learners so online learning will realize its potential to close achievement gaps instead of widening them.

The Digital Divide

Because access to technology and the possession of computer literacy skills are requisites for online course success, the *digital divide* is another phenomenon that scholars have identified as one of the reasons African-American online learners experience lower course persistence rates and grades when compared to students in other race/ethnic groups (Fairlie, 2012; Merrills, 2010; Moore, 2014; Moore et al., 2002; Salvo et al., 2017). Salvo et al. (2017) defined the digital divide as the disparity in technology access and skills that impact disadvantaged populations. Many students are deprived of the basic technological requisites for participation in online courses, including computers and high-speed internet or broadband service. They may also lack the computer literacy skills that facilitate learning in an online environment, such as the ability to access videos and download instructional material.

Computer ownership and broadband adoption. According to data collected by the Pew Research Center (PRC), African-Americans are less likely to own desktop or laptop computers and have broadband service in their homes than Whites (Perrin, 2017). The Pew researchers found that 83% of Whites owned computers compared to 66% of Blacks. Also, 78% of Whites were broadband adopters while the same was true for only 65% of Blacks (Perrin,

2017). Merrills (2010) posited that household income influences computer ownership and broadband adoption rates. The Pew Research Center (PRC, 2016) agreed, and in a survey of Americans without broadband service, determined that the monthly cost of broadband subscriptions, as well as the high credit scores required by broadband service providers, often prohibited access to required internet connectivity. The PRC added that African-Americans have historically had lower household incomes than Whites. For example, in 2014, the median household income for Black families was $43,300 compared to $71,300 for Whites (PRC, 2016).

Smartphones and internet access. Despite the racial gap in computer ownership and broadband access, African-Americans tend to own smartphones at rates similar to their White peers, according to the PRC (Perrin, 2017). The Center reported that 77% of Whites own a smartphone compared to 72% of Blacks. The PRC (2016) explained that smartphones help bridge the digital divide by providing African-Americans, who do not have broadband, with internet access that allows them to conduct job searches and complete other tasks online. However, the researchers also pointed out that cell phone service is more likely to be cancelled for this population due to non-payment (PRC, 2016). In addition, Salvo et al. (2017) held that African-Americans are more likely than any other population to use smartphones as their primary means for accessing the Internet. The authors asserted that, when it comes to the technology needed for online course success, smartphones are not adequate substitutes for desktop or laptop computers (Salvo et al., 2017). They explained that mobile devices may not be compatible with the learning management systems (such as Blackboard and Canvas) used to deliver online instruction. As a consequence, students may not have full access to instructional materials when they use smartphones to access an online course. In addition, Salvo et al. (2017)

cited empirical evidence showing that smaller screen sizes reduce reading clarity, make it more difficult for users to recall the information they read, and inhibit video-based learning.

Technology skills. Moore (2014) stated that because African-Americans have not had access to computers comparable to the access that Whites have had, African-American students have not had adequate opportunities to develop the requisite technological skills to succeed in the online learning environment. The PRC reported that 46% of African-Americans expressed an interest in receiving training to improve their computer literacy and internet skills and to become more confident in using the technology, compared to 20% of Whites (Perrin, 2017). In addition, Salvo et al. (2017) asserted that African-American male students who withdrew from online classes indicated that they did so largely because of their discomfort with navigating the technology. Moore (2014) argued, "As online learning expands, it is apparent that this disadvantage in basic technological skills could adversely affect academic achievement" (p. 25).

Digital divide. There is clear evidence that the digital divide is detrimental to the academic achievement of African-American community college online learners. The large-scale analysis of over 4,000 online course registrations conducted by Moore et al. (2002) found that of the Black students who failed to successfully complete their online courses, 56% indicated that limited computer access was a "very important" factor in that failure; this compares to only 9% of White students who did not successfully complete their online courses (p. 14). In addition, Fairlie (2012) conducted an experimental study to determine whether computer ownership would impact educational outcomes for minoritized community college students. The author provided computers to randomly selected minoritized and White financial aid recipients at a community college and found that the students of color who received the computers had higher course completion rates, better grades, and were even more likely to graduate than their peers who did

not receive the free computers (Fairlie, 2012). While the students of color benefited from the free computers, the White students did not benefit in substantial ways. Fairlie (2012) argued that owning the computers benefited the students of color so efficaciously because those students had less access to computers than the White students. Not only did the students of color not own computers, but they did not have relatives and friends who owned computers that they could use to complete their course work.

Gap Analysis

The extant literature on the experiences of African-American community college learners explores the inequities in academic achievement between Black and White students. The leading causes of these inequities include academic disadvantage, Black student learning styles not being honored in the online environment, and the digital divide. However, despite the challenges encountered by African-American students as they pursue online learning, there is evidence that some of the students nonetheless achieve success. For example, Moore et al. (2002) found that 43% of Black students in their study earned grades of "C" or better in online courses. However, a much higher percentage of non-Black online learners in the study earned grades of "C" or better.

What strategies did the students use to overcome these odds and succeed in online courses? Here the literature is silent. In order to fill this gap in extant research, this study gives voice to African-American community college students who defeated the odds and successfully completed online courses. The intent is to understand, through in-depth interviews, their lived experience as online learners, the challenges they faced in their online courses, and the strategies they used to overcome those challenges and complete their courses with a grade of "C" or higher. Information about these positive deviants may help those who teach and lead at community colleges increase the success rates of African-American students in online courses

and, ultimately, the rates at which these students complete community college credentials and/or transfer to universities.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHOD

Because the goal of the study was to document the experiences of successful Black, community college online students, a qualitative research approach was used. The testimonies of these students are missing from the literature, and a qualitative study was believed to be the most effective approach to capture them. Through in-depth interviews, the study explored the challenges students faced, the strategies they used to overcome those challenges, and the resources that helped support their success. The study was guided by three research questions:

1. What were the challenges that African-American community college online learners experienced as they pursued online coursework?
2. What resources were at the disposal of African-American community college online learners to help them overcome the challenges they experienced while taking online classes?
3. What strategies did African-American community college online learners employ to succeed in online classes?

Underlying these questions was a postcolonial/indigenous research paradigm that challenges deficit thinking and pathological descriptions of historically oppressed groups. This paradigm enables the researcher to reconstruct a body of knowledge that exhibits hope and promotes transformation among the research participants. In addition, the researcher was mindful of the principles of relational accountability, respectful representation of the participants, and reciprocity. It was expected that, as a result of participating in this study, the students who told their stories of how they succeeded at online learning would attribute their accomplishment to their strengths, power, and resourcefulness.

Considering positionality, I was an insider in relation to the students' racial identity. Our ethnicities and cultures were similar. This commonality enabled the study participants to trust me, which yielded authentic data consistent with the participants' actual experiences. Nonetheless, being both a researcher and an administrator presented a power dynamic of which I had to be conscious. I was not the participants' peer. I was also older than all the study participants, which had the potential to put some distance between the participants and me or to act as a barrier in the researcher-participant relationship. There was the potential that I could influence the students' responses given the power dynamic, but I worked hard to establish trust with the students to minimize this possibility. I discussed with the students what we had in common including having children, and being from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. I also frequently emphasized that the students were the experts regarding their experience in online courses while I was looking to learn from them. As evidence that the students trusted me, they often asked me a number of questions after the interviews were completed, about resources that the college offered and how to navigate the educational system.

Data Collection

The data collection strategies consisted of semi-structured interviews with 12 research participants. There were two rounds of interviews with each student; each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were all conducted by phone and recorded, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the initial interviews, I posed a series of open-ended questions to the participants. Please see the appendix for the interview protocol. Once the interviews with the study participants were completed, they were transcribed verbatim. Once the first round of interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify the

meaning of participant responses and explore themes that emerged during the initial analysis. A minimal amount of follow-up data was collected using e-mail and text messages.

Approach to Interviewing

Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) approach to interviewing as a social practice in which the interviewer learns about the research participant's experiences, opinions, and world view, suggests that interviewing is an appropriate data collection method for discovering the behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes that led to PDs' successes. Interview research is also consistent with the PD framework, which emphasizes that researchers should engage PDs in conversations that prompt PDs to reflect on and uncover the wisdom they possess regarding strategies for overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles (Pascale et al., 2010). This is consistent with Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) view of interviews as a form of human interaction. The researcher and the participant have a conversation that gives the researcher access to the participant's world and allows the researcher to understand how the participant experiences the world. The PDs' ability to navigate the world of online learning in a way that results in academic success is at the heart of what I endeavored to unearth through the craft of interviewing.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stated that the purpose of a research interview is to produce knowledge. They emphasize that knowledge is constructed during the interview through the interaction between the researcher and the participant. Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) point regarding the interdependence between knowledge construction and the interview presents additional evidence supporting the inclusion of interviews in the methodology I employed to study the success of PDs. My goal for the study was to understand how PDs experienced online learning by interviewing them. My interaction with the PDs produced knowledge regarding the

strategies they used to succeed in online courses. The new knowledge will be used to help the PDs' peers become successful as well.

Participant Selection

The site for the study was a large community college in the Midwest. The college's 2019 annual credit/non-credit enrollment was over 25,000 students. Only 10% of the student population is African-American. In the fall of 2018, the college offered over 250 sections of online courses spanning more than 40 departments. In 2016, 11% of Black students enrolled in at least one online course, compared to 69% of White students.

The institutional research (IR) department at the college provided a list of students who self-identified as African-American and earned a grade of "C" or better in at least two fully online asynchronous courses within the past two years. The IR department provided the list in March 2020. Thus, the students on the list had been online learners prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also important for me to include students who, in addition to meeting these two criteria, were economically and academically disadvantaged. I therefore asked the IR department to provide further breakdowns, identifying those on the list who received or who were eligible for Pell grants, or who were from low-income households (i.e., less than $48,500 for a family of three—a benchmark employed by Bennett et al. [2020] of the Pew Research Center). I also asked the IR department to further limit the list of potential participants to those who were academically disadvantaged (i.e., those who had tested into developmental courses). However, the IR department declined to make the requested breakdowns by income and academic status, citing privacy concerns protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). I therefore determined whether study participants met the income and academic status criteria by asking them questions during the interviewing process.

The study criteria were selected to reflect findings in the literature regarding challenges that a significant number of African-American online learners have encountered, including economic and academic disadvantages. PDs needed to have overcome the same or greater challenges than their peers. Literature regarding African-American online learners indicates that the reasons for their inequitable success rates include being economically disadvantaged, which leads to less access to the technology and the technological skills needed to succeed in online learning (Merrills, 2010; Perrin, 2017; PRC, 2016). In addition, students from low-income backgrounds are often deprived of the opportunity to receive a college preparatory education while in high school that would equip them with the academic skills necessary for the independent study required in online courses (Cochran et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Salvo et al., 2017). To reiterate, for study participants to qualify as positive deviants, they must have experienced the same or worse challenges experienced by those who did not succeed in online courses, and they must have had access to the same or fewer resources than were available to their unsuccessful peers (Pascale et al., 2010). The criteria for participants in this study ensured that the students who were interviewed were truly those who succeeded against the same odds their peers faced.

The IR directory of potential study participants yielded a list of 258 women and 106 men who were all emailed and asked if they would be interested in participating in the study. Over 20 students responded to the recruitment email. Fourteen students agreed to participate in the first and second rounds of interviews. Two of the students were excluded from the study. One of the excluded participants was African, rather than African-American, and the other had already earned a bachelor's degree. A total of twelve students remained in the study and participated in the first and second rounds of interviews. Eleven of the research participants identified as women

and one identified as a man. Ten of the 12 students placed into developmental education classes. Five of the students placed into both English and math developmental education classes. Three of the students placed into math only and two placed into English only developmental education classes. The two students who did not place into developmental education classes had been placed on academic probation during their first or second semester in college. Regarding economic disadvantage, 8 of the 12 students reported that they received the Pell grant. The other four students met the low-income household criteria.

Purposive sampling was used in this study, given the need to select participants on the basis of a particular set of shared characteristics (Crossman, 2018). A $25 Amazon gift card incentive was offered to the 12 students for their participation. Due to the small dollar amount of the incentive, its effect on the study results was negligible. The incentive did not impact the data or how study participants responded to interview questions. The incentive was only offered as a gesture of reciprocity. It was used as a way to give back to study participants in recognition of the knowledge they shared with the researcher and the time they devoted to the study.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using coding and thematic analysis. Coding is the process of categorizing and sorting the data in ways that are relevant to the research purpose (Glesne, 2011). Coding helps the researcher define what the data mean and is used to determine patterns in the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that involves identifying themes in the data to make sense of the data or interpret what the data mean (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). A theme is a pattern that surfaces in the data representing something significant or interesting about the data or research questions.

Glesne (2011) stated that thematic analysis is frequently used within sociological traditions of treating "text as a window into human experience" (p. 184). I chose to use thematic analysis to analyze the data because I felt that identifying themes and patterns in the data would be the best way to gain insight into the students' experiences. The thematic analysis was conducted according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) argued that this framework is the most clear and practical. Braun and Clarke (2006) identified two different kinds of thematic analysis—theoretical thematic analysis and inductive thematic analysis. Theoretical thematic analysis, also called top-down analysis, is guided by the research questions or the researcher's focus. Inductive analysis, also referred to as bottom-up analysis, is guided by the data itself. Top-down analysis was used in this study because analyzing the data with the specific research questions in mind caused the PDs' strategies for success to emerge.

The first step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for conducting thematic analysis is to become familiar with the data. This step involves reading all the interview transcripts and making notes about initial impressions regarding the participants' responses to the questions.

The second step is to generate initial codes. Data were organized in a meaningful way during this step. Only aspects of the data that were relevant to the research questions were coded. I used open coding, which means codes were developed while combing through the data, instead of having pre-determined codes. I first observed the notes that were made about the data in step one, then I used Nvivo qualitative data analysis software to review the transcripts again and code the data.

The third step is to search for themes. I identified patterns in the data (i.e. themes) by examining the codes. For example, if there were several codes that related to students being

challenged by finding a way to keep track of assignment deadlines, those codes were collated into a theme called "organizational skills."

Step four is to review the themes. I reviewed and modified the themes that were identified in step three, ensuring that the themes made sense, that the data supported the themes, and that the themes were coherent and distinct from each other. During this step, I matched all the coded data with its appropriate theme, to determine whether the data supported the themes. Next, I considered whether the themes accurately captured the data both within each participant interview and across all the interviews. If there were inaccuracies or inconsistencies, the themes were modified, or new themes and subthemes were created during the analysis.

Step five is to define the themes. During this step, I articulated the meaning of each theme, explained how the themes related to each other, and explained how any subthemes interacted with the main themes. I discuss how the themes related to each other in the narrative of Chapter 5.

Step six includes writing up the report of the thematic analysis. The report for this study is contained in Chapters 4 and 5 of the dissertation.

Validity/Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) described four criteria that qualitative researchers might strive to meet, to ensure the trustworthiness of their studies. The author explained that *credibility* is the component of trustworthiness that addresses the question of whether the researcher presented an accurate depiction of the phenomenon under study. *Transferability* involves the researcher offering enough details about the context of their study so a reader may decide whether the researcher's findings apply to another setting. *Dependability* has to do with the researcher providing sufficient information for another scholar to replicate their study. Lastly, *confirmability* pertains to the

researcher producing evidence that the study findings resulted from the data and not from the researcher's bias, opinions, and preconceived notions (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility

I chose three of Shenton's (2004) strategies to accomplish credibility in the current study. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation represented the first strategy. I spent extended time with the research participants to learn about their experiences. In addition to the two phone interviews, I checked in with the research participants as the COVID-19 pandemic developed and as protesters spoke out against racial injustice across the country. The extended time also helped me develop trust with the participants.

Member checking was the second strategy. I shared the interview transcripts with the participants to ensure the transcripts represented the participants and their ideas accurately. This strategy is consistent with the postcolonial/indigenous research paradigm that emphasizes relational accountability. Reviewing the transcripts with the participants is respectful of the relationships that were developed with them, and it held me accountable to the participants to represent them authentically.

The last strategy was a rich, thick description. In Chapters 4 and 5, I describe participants and the research setting to draw the reader into the research context to address the credibility of the study.

Transferability

Shenton (2004) asserted that a thick description of the phenomena emerging in the study also helps readers understand the study findings and the extent to which they are transferable. In addition, I addressed transferability by providing (in previous sections of this chapter) information about the criteria for selecting study participants, the number of study participants,

and the data collection methods. Shenton (2004) suggested that such details will help readers determine if study findings apply to other research settings. Before conducting the interviews, I consulted institutional documents that describe online programming at the study site, noting the number of online courses offered across disciplines, data on the enrollment in these courses, policies governing which students may enroll, and any other information that would explain the institutional context experienced by the interviewees.

Dependability

I ensured the study's dependability by adhering to Shenton's (2004) recommendation to include in-depth coverage of the study's processes and research methods—all important to those interested in replicating the study. This can be seen in this chapter's detailed descriptions of the research design and its implementation, as well as in my account of how data were collected. In addition, I reflected on the processes chosen and offered an evaluation of their effectiveness.

Confirmability

Finally, to address confirmability, I was transparent about any predispositions and explained why certain choices were made regarding the research methods employed. Shenton (2004) argued that admitting one's bias is key to demonstrating that the research findings result from the data and not from the researcher's opinions. Also, in Chapter 5, I discuss any preliminary theories that guided my thinking at the start of the study but that were not supported by the data. Shenton (2004) explained that this kind of honest reflection contributes significantly to increasing the trustworthiness of a study.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues were addressed primarily by securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study. Central to this approval was the care taken in the study to assure

confidentiality and (as described above) the attention I paid to meaningful reciprocity with the study participants. Confidentiality of the research participants was maintained through the use of pseudonyms throughout the study. The participants chose their own pseudonyms. Another ethical issue was my status as an outsider. The ways in which I addressed that issue were covered in the narrative section regarding positionality. However, to reiterate, I ensured no harm was done to the students by spending time with them, gaining an understanding of their experiences, and being transparent with them regarding who I was and what made me pursue the study. Also, participants had access to the interview transcripts. The research participants helped the researcher frame their story in a way that was authentic for them.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The previous chapter described the current study of 12 successful African-American community college online learners. Data were collected during two rounds of phone interviews with the students. Data were then transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis.

The focus of this chapter is the research findings regarding the challenges students experienced while taking online classes, the resources they used to address those challenges, and the strategies they employed to succeed. The chapter begins with short vignettes that help the reader get to know each student. After the vignettes, literature regarding the African-American student experience and online student experience is woven throughout a discussion of the students' observations. The chapter concludes with a summary of how successful Black students experienced online classes.

Overview of Student Backgrounds

The students were an equal mix of traditional and nontraditional in terms of their ages, with nontraditional students being defined as those 24 years of age or older. Two of the students were reverse transfers, meaning they first attended a 4-year university before they attended the community college. All but one of the students worked and most of them held full-time jobs. In addition, most of them were enrolled in school full-time. Half of the students were parents and most of them parented young children. In addition to overcoming several obstacles, being resourceful, and using various strategies to succeed, the students were motivated by both their goals and their families to succeed. Finally, as they persisted and successfully completed their online classes, the students' unique strengths were revealed. Some passed developmental education classes online, while others completed assignments without having access to the

necessary technology at home. Table 1 below summarizes their demographics, challenges, resources, strategies, and other characteristics.

Table 1

Student Profile Analysis

Name	Age	Work Status	Enrollment Status	Children	Pathway to CC	Strategy for Success	Examples of Persistence	Challenges	Resources	Motivation
Alex	20	Part-time	Full-time	0	Straight out of high school.	Avoid distractions by completing assignments away from home.	Found the motivation to complete assignments in the absence of a physical instructor during a pandemic.	Understanding assignment instructions and teacher expectations. Not receiving timely answers to questions.	70-year-old grandmother who had taken online classes previously.	To be the one in her family who earns a degree.
Alice	22	Part-time	Full-time	2 children, 1-year-old twins	Reverse transfer from private university.	Complete assignments well in advance of the deadline.	Conquered procrastination.	Having to figure out how to manage time to complete assignments.	Problem-solving ability, family who help with childcare.	To provide the best life for her children and to achieve her career goals.
April	27	Full-time	Full-time	1 child, 3-years old	Worked after high school. Attended college for paid program.	Not taking classes she finds difficult online. Takes them F2F instead.	Successful in classes despite not having the technology at home to complete online assignments.	No internet service at home.	Ability to persist.	Wants to achieve her educational goals.
Cindy	27	Full-time	Full-time	3 children, ages 3, 5, and 8	Went to college after working and earning GED.	Use tutoring services and a planner to help manage time.	Earned grades of "A" and "B" in online developmental education classes.	Taking Biology lab classes online due to pandemic.	College instructors, tutors.	Desire to achieve her career goal.
Irene	23	Full-time	Part-time	0	Reverse transfer from a state university.	Used internet sources and videos to help her understand course content.	Took her least favorite discipline online, math, and passed the class with a "C" or better.	Managing online assignment deadlines.	Problem-solving ability, determination.	Wanting to be the best she can be.

Name	Age	Work Status	Enrollment Status	Children	Pathway to CC	Strategy for Success	Examples of Persistence	Challenges	Resources	Motivation
Maria	18	Part-time	Full-time	0	Straight out of high school.	Prioritizes completing assignments. Completes difficult assignments first because they take more time.	Combatted isolation by finding a peer to answer questions about content.	Having to wait for instructors to respond to questions via email.	Help-seeking ability, time management and organizational skills.	Wants to achieve her career goal and make her mom and grandparents proud.
Mariah	22	Full-time	Part-time	0	Worked after high school, purchased a home at 20 and then went to college.	Set goals to stay motivated to complete assignments; use a planner to keep track of assignment deadlines.	Learned self-directed learning skills such as time management and organization independently.	Distractions, such as the lure to socialize with friends, threatened plans to complete assignments.	Problem-solving skills, self-discipline.	Desire to have a fulfilling career and achieve economic mobility.
Michelle	39	Part-time	Part-time	2 children, ages 15 and 17	Worked after high school and then went to college as a non-traditional student.	Seek tutoring and help from instructors to improve academic performance.	Realized that asking for help is not a sign of weakness.	Staying focused on school work.	Tutors, instructors, spirituality.	Desire to achieve educational and career goals.
Renee	30	Full-time	Full-time	2 children, ages 5 and 2	Worked after high school and attended college as a non-traditional student.	Complete assignments well in advance of the deadline to reduce stress and have more time to prep for exams.	Took math and English developmental ed. classes online and passed them.	Balancing work, school and parenthood.	Self-motivation, self-discipline, reliable internet resources to get answers to questions about content.	Love for her children, for school and a desire for upward mobility.
Richard	25	Full-time	Full-time	0	Reverse transfer from state university. After a hiatus, enrolled as a non-traditional student.	Used Internet videos to better understand course content.	Maintained status as an Honors student while working full-time and attending classes full-time.	Coping with racial injustice and police brutality during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Sense of community and platform to effect change in Honors program.	Commitment to change and the prospect of being able to help others.
Sabrina	39	N/A	Part-time	1 adult child, 22	Attended college through VA voc rehab program.	Ask instructors questions and seek out tutoring services to improve academic performance.	Successfully completed coursework while managing physical and mental disabilities.	Limited access to broadband, an unreliable computer, difficulty focusing and organizing due dates.	Instructors, tutors, “can do” attitude.	Goals to help others, desire to serve as a role model for young people in her family, making family proud.
Sarah	21	Full-time	Full-time	0	Reverse transfer from state university.	Use a planner to keep track of assignment deadlines.	Learned to develop time management & organizational skills by reaching out to others who had mastered those skills.	Balancing school with work and family obligations to care for younger siblings with disabilities.	Church family, spirituality, problem-solving skills.	Wants to be a good influence on her siblings.

Student Profiles

Alex

Alex is 20 years old. She attended community college straight out of high school because she was undecided about her major and career path. She decided it was best to choose a less expensive option for her education while figuring out what career to pursue. She was also not ready to leave home.

Alex chose to enroll in online classes to accommodate her work schedule. During her first year at the college, she worked part-time at the local park district and attended classes full-time. “I like online because you can go at your own pace, especially if you are someone that works a lot. I feel like it's easier,” she said. However, while online learning had its benefits for Alex, it had its disadvantages as well. “I think at first it was kind of overwhelming for me. Like trying to get what the teacher expects. She'll put up the [assignments], and sometimes I'll be confused about it.” Instead of contacting her instructor or peers to clarify the assignments, Alex reached out to her 70-year-old grandmother for help since she had recently returned to school and taken online classes. Alex explained how difficult it is, at times, to receive help from an online instructor. “Sometimes when you email, they don't really respond right away, or it takes days, and then the assignment has to be turned in. And so it's like they basically didn't help you. Sometimes I do miss the communication and actually going in person.”

Another challenge that Alex experienced while taking online classes was finding the motivation to complete assignments in the absence of a physical classroom. “Doing it online, I feel like it's definitely different than going to school ’cause you're at home. Sometimes, especially if you're just sitting in your room, your TV's there, and you're like, ‘I know I need to do homework,’ but at the same time, you don't want to.” Alex said she felt more motivated to

complete her online assignments if she moved to a different room in the house or went to the library or a local coffee house. But in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting quarantine presented a new twist on an old challenge. Alex had to find new solutions. “I would say the difficult thing for me was trying to stay motivated, especially since we were stuck in the house for two months. As time went on, being in quarantine, I found new ways to stay motivated. On the days that it was nice outside, I would go on walks/jogs. When it was cold out, I would workout in my living room.”

Alex also lost her job at a park district due to the pandemic. “As of right now I am receiving unemployment benefits from the government,” she said. “But I am still applying to jobs just in case I can’t return to my actual job.” During the summer of 2020, Alex joined those protesting the death of George Floyd. “I’ve been attending as many protests as I can and also signed petitions because enough is enough and it is time for change.”

Alex explained her motivation for persisting in her online classes despite the challenges she encountered during such an unusual school year: “To be the one in my family to actually get a degree. I feel like that's what's motivating me.”

Alice

Alice is 22 years old. She works part-time in the hospitality industry. She is a reverse transfer student from a private university. She was not doing well, academically, at the university. After taking classes for a year and a half, and becoming pregnant with her twin boys, she left the university to attend her local community college so she could save money. Alice is majoring in business administration. She takes classes full time. Her career goal is to work in human resources.

Like many other students, Alice enrolled in online classes to help balance school with work and family obligations. “I decided to take online classes because of my kids. I knew that it would be difficult to work and go to an actual class to sit down in. So, taking online classes gives you that added flexibility to still be at home with them during the evenings while I do homework and whatnot.”

The challenges that Alice experienced as an online learner were related to the study habits she developed in high school. “I was just leaving everything off to the last minute, and I was under a lot more stress trying to accomplish all of my assignments because I procrastinated so much. It just took a lot of little adjustments to actually buckle down and do what I needed to do. In high school I did everything at the last minute and still managed to pass, so I had to really reevaluate once I got to college and start taking it more seriously, and prepping and studying far enough in advance, things like that.”

But once Alice put herself on a schedule and managed her time to study and complete assignments, she became a straight “A” student. This occurred despite the demands of her home life as a working mom of 1-year-old twin boys. “There's the life challenges that get in the way. There's always those added distractions. I keep up with my home. I cook dinner almost every single night. It's a lot of things that I do. My kids have doctor's appointments, and they get sick and, and everything. I live with one of my sisters, and so she helps me when she can. My parents, they help when they can. It's mostly just moral support. Other than that, everything else is left up to me.”

Alice has found a way to stay motivated to achieve her goals. “My philosophy is like, if I work hard now, lose sleep now, do everything that I need to get done now, by the time my children are in kindergarten, I should be set up. I should be in my career. And things should be

easier. Like living on my own and have just, you know, everything on my own by then. That's my mindset right now."

Alice credits her strong motivations for her success in online classes. "All I can say is that I feel that I am successful because of what motivates me to do well. I mean, I'm a mom now, so, you know, I have to. My success is also my children's success. So that is a motivating thing that keeps me going even when I wanted to go to bed at 10 o'clock, but I still had to stay up and do homework. But in the end, it will be worth it. Another thing is I'm also doing it for myself. You know, like I want to be successful in life. I want to eventually be the human resources director for a chain of [hotel] properties. I have my own goals that I want to reach."

April

April is 27 years old. She works full-time at a bank. Her goal is to earn a Bachelor's degree and become a CPA. She has a 3-year-old daughter. April said that she decided to attend her local community college when she heard about a program that would pay for her education in one of several disciplines. She chose Accounting.

April chose to enroll in online classes, because with work and family obligations, she does not have the time to sit in face-to-face classes. She explained that one of her strategies for online success is not to take courses she finds difficult, online. Instead, she takes them face-to-face so that she does not have to learn difficult material independently. The disadvantage to this strategy, however, is the demand that it places on her time. "I don't have time to do the face-to-face classes. I make time for them because they're required, but I can't do the face-to-face courses all the time. Like, I'm taking five classes right now. Three of them are face-to-face. That's four hours each day that I have to go sit in somebody's face. So online classes are just easier for me."

April explained how tough it is to work full-time, take care of her daughter, and complete coursework. Managing so many responsibilities means that there's not much time to rest. "This last semester, I had class on Mondays and Wednesdays from 6 to 9:30pm. After I finished with school, I would get my daughter and then go home and do homework. Typically I was up all night doing homework."

One major challenge that April faced when she first began taking online classes was that she did not have internet service at home. She explained that she had to make some sacrifices to complete her online assignments. "When I needed to do my homework, I would go to the school after work and use their computer until I could purchase internet at my home. It was a barrier because I'm a mom, and I would have to go to school to do homework when I could have gone home to do it. But, I didn't have Internet. I didn't have other options. Obviously, if I wanted to get the work done, I had to figure out a way. So that was my only way."

When asked what motivates her to persist and sacrifice despite having to navigate a number of challenges, she simply said, "I just want to finish college. Yeah, I guess you could say for my daughter, but it's for myself really. I just want to finish college."

Cindy

Cindy is 27 years old. She has three children, ages 3, 5, and 8. She works full-time as a warehouse worker. Her career goal is to become a registered nurse. Cindy decided to enroll in classes at the local community college after studying independently to earn her GED. "I just thought that I didn't want to be at a job that I didn't like. I wanted a career, and I knew in order for me to do that, I would have to get a degree of some sort. So I went back to school in 2018. I started out with the online classes because it was like, I thought it would be flexible for me because I did have three kids and I was working 10-hour shifts, four days a week. And then I

didn't really have time to be on campus all the time. So I did the flexible course thing first and then that worked really well for me. So the rest of my courses I just did fully online."

Cindy was placed into developmental math and English courses, which she took online during her first semester at the community college. She passed them with an "A" and a "B," respectively. She said that going to tutoring several times a week helped her pass her English class. When asked what was difficult about taking classes online during her first semester, she replied, "Time. I found it difficult to be available to do my work with my busy schedule, with the kids, and then a full-time job, and then house duties. I rarely found myself studying." Cindy's English professor introduced the class to the strategy of using a planner to pencil in time to study. "She would always tell us, 'You have to put education as your first priority. In order for you to be able to succeed, you have to study. In order for you to study, you have to have time. You have to make time. You have to get a calendar.' We had to map out our whole day and make sure we added studying in there, and I actually started using that strategy."

Cindy said that the COVID-19 pandemic brought additional challenges to her online studies: "My Biology class was the most challenging class I have yet to encounter. I had to study, study, study! Due to the Coronavirus, all lab exercises were held online only. It was really tough and confusing. But my professor opened his availability to answering all of the student questions and concerns, and I took great advantage of that. Every time I was confused or had a question, I would email my professor, and he would schedule a face-to-face session and explain course assignments until I understood the concept. It was the end of the semester, but the assignments started to become harder. I wanted to give up so bad, but I was almost finished with the course, so I continued to study."

Cindy explained that her desire to achieve her career goal is one of the things that motivates her when it becomes difficult to do her online coursework. “I don't always feel motivated, but at the end of the day, it's like I'm only gonna get one shot. I'm not trying to fail a class, re-do a class. I need to have this degree within this certain time frame. After you do a class, you have to do another class, and then with the nursing program, it's like you have to have the Tease test, you have to have all of your physicals in. It's like I don't have time to be wasting. So, that's what motivates me because anytime that I'm sitting around not doing anything, I feel like I'm wasting time.”

Cindy said that she succeeded in online classes because she made studying a priority. “I put my education as my first priority. Sometimes I put it above my kids. Sometimes, I'll just, [say] ‘Okay, you know, what? Y'all go in the room. I need to study.’ In order for you to succeed in any of your classes, you have to do the work. You have to be committed. You don't have to want to do the work, but you just have to do it. But for me, I'll be motivated to do the work just so I can do good on it.”

Irene

Irene is 23 years old. She works two part-time jobs totaling up to 46 hours a week in the gaming industry. After being educationally disadvantaged and attending three different high schools, she attended a state university for a year but was placed on academic probation. She then enrolled at her local community college but transferred to another community college after a couple of semesters, to pursue an associate degree in game design. Her goal is to earn a bachelor’s degree in the field and then a master’s degree in animation. She wants to own a game design company and focus on creating horror games. “I feel like there's not enough games that

focus on horror and the human mind. I really want to make games that really like mess with your head," she said, laughing.

Irene explained why she began taking online classes. "I was getting a little anxiety when it came to being in rooms full of people. I don't know. It freaked me out sometimes. So I wanted to take online classes and give it a chance because, you know, I don't have the pressure of having to go into class and a lot of the pressure of 'I have to do this presentation in front of a whole bunch of people.' So it was just easier for me to be like, okay, I'm at home. I'm responsible for my own work, and I can keep track of everything myself without talking to people."

But while online learning helped remedy Irene's anxiety, it was not without its challenges. "I think when I first started online, it was a little bit overwhelming for me because due dates were really weird and scary. I took three different classes, but then the due dates within the class are completely different because, of course, you're not on a typical in-person schedule. And so it was a little overwhelming for me. I remember I missed an exam or two, once. So it was really hard basically when I first started."

Irene found a way to overcome the challenges. "Basically, I just buckled down so that the next semester, I learned how to keep track of all of my assignments. I learned how to check the calendars frequently 'cause I know sometimes professors change things. I learned how to stay organized." Irene's problem-solving skills were evident as she taught herself how to succeed as an online learner. She said she learned "basically by trial and error. A lot of it was more like, 'Oh, I missed the due date.' I'm like, 'Okay, so since I missed a due date, then what I'm going to do now is to keep a calendar, and I'm just going to go ahead and write down all my assignments.' I always would check my calendar every single week. I would make sure my calendar actually matched up with the calendar in [the class]. You know, like I said, sometimes professors change

things or maybe I didn't write the due date as I initially saw it. So I would basically just double-check everything every single time I logged on."

Irene faced another challenge when she took an online math class. "Math is literally my least favorite subject in the world. I did not seek tutoring through the school, but I basically just went on YouTube, watched videos on the problems I was working on or whatever chapter I was on. I would just look it up or look up different resources on how to get better at it." When asked why she did not seek help from the college's free tutoring services, she said, "I don't know what it is. It's something that I've always had ever since high school. I've never really been one to seek out help from school. I don't know why that is, but I know I'm kind of a do-it-yourself person. I feel like if I can't do it myself and be able to solve it myself, that I'm not really learning, you know. I guess it's like I don't want to seek help 'cause I can do it myself or learn how to do it myself.

In addition to her problem-solving skills and ability to learn independently, Irene shared another secret to her success in online learning. "I think it would be my determination, honestly. I have a weird thing that I get from my mom. Well, when I grew up, I was under strict grades. When I was in high school, anything that wasn't an 'A' was not really acceptable. So I've really been hard on my grades, and if I get a 'C,' I'm upset. I'm not okay. I need a 'B' or higher. If there's not an 'A,' there's a problem. I want to be the best that I know I can be. I like to know that I tried my best."

Maria

Maria is 18 years old. She works two part-time jobs in food service and retail and attends classes full-time. She decided to attend community college right after she graduated from high school. She is pursuing an associate in science degree to become a veterinarian. In her first

semester of college, she enrolled in three online classes and one face-to-face class. She explained why she prefers online learning. “I took online classes because it was kind of nerve- wracking going into a different environment from high school to college. I also prefer online classes because I work at my own pace, and I just like to take notes without having to be rushed or anything.”

But despite the advantages of online learning, Maria experienced some challenges as well. “You really have to self-motivate, and then it's also hard because if you do have questions or concerns, you have to wait on the professor to email you back. And there's no guarantee that they might check their email right away or check it in time for you to finish an assignment. And then even if your professor did not answer you, I can't reach out to my peers because I've never met them in person and there's no guarantee that they even check their school email.”

Maria took the initiative to combat the isolation that often accompanies online learning. She found a classmate to help her when she was having trouble in her medical terminology class. “In most online classes, you always have to go through an introduction where you tell the class a little bit about yourself. I went back to our introduction discussion, and I was scrolling through the multiple replies, and I kind of just picked this girl that looked around my age. I ended up emailing her, and we ended up having more than one class together, and she was able to help me through multiple classes. It was really nice. We're still friends to this day.”

Maria admitted that disciplining herself to complete online assignments and applying time management and organizational skills to succeed in online learning is something that she still struggles with after being at it for two semesters. But she has developed some useful strategies. “I kind of prioritize it [schoolwork] based off of what classes I'm struggling in the most to the least. Like, if I'm struggling in one class more than another, I'm going to focus on

that class 'cause it's going to take me longer to complete the assignments for that class than the one that's not as hard for me." Her other advice for success: work ahead. "Like, if you know you have work due next week, and you're taking more than one online class, just get it started so when that day comes you either have it done or almost done, and you're not stressing as much." She added, "Have some type of agenda book or set reminders because it's really easy to forget when homework assignments are due for online classes because there's nowhere, no one reminding you. There's no face-to-face teacher asking you for it or coming after you. So that's definitely something and to just stay organized in general because it can be overwhelming."

When Maria experienced challenges with online learning, her mother's encouragement and her desire to achieve her career goal helped her to overcome. "My mom has always been really big on school, so she's always pushed me and I really would like to become a veterinarian." Her grandparents are also a big source of motivation for her. "My mom is just a single mom. So, they [her grandparents] were also a major part of my life, and they always want to see me become what I've always wanted to be, which is a veterinarian. So I kind of do what I do to make them proud as well. I guess just wanting to show everyone that I can do it."

Mariah

Mariah is 22 years old. She works full-time at a warehouse and attends classes part-time. She bought a house at age 20, so she was not able to go away for college. She chose to attend a community college because it is affordable and close to home. She has not decided on a major but is leaning toward business. "I could see being a CEO," she said. "I have a couple of plans I want to do because, at first, I wanted to go into the medical field, but I work a full-time job and have to pay all of my bills. I can't really go into a medical program. It's like a full-time job." Taking online classes gives Mariah the flexibility she needs to balance work and school.

Mariah said she found educational technology to be a challenge when she first took online classes. “At first, it was overwhelming,” she said. “But once you work with it, you know, practice, you'll get it more because it's a lot of stuff you have to click into to get into an assignment or get into the messages, or it's a whole bunch of tabs you have to go through.” However, she learned how to master the learning management system and the self-directed skills for online success on her own. She did not reach out to others for help. Instead, she said, “I just dealt with it. I just got me a planner, and I just basically tried to figure out when the due date [was], and then it just helped me be more calm. So I'm like, ‘Oh, I know when this is due, so I'm gonna just try to work on this assignment for right now and not worry about any other ones.’ I just took it one by one.”

Another challenge that Mariah faced was staying motivated to complete online coursework. “Basically, it's different from going into class ’cause you are already motivated because you're already up going to class. Since you're online, you don't have to go anywhere, you're stuck at home. So it's a lot of distractions. You know, your phone, your TV, your friends want to go and party or kick it, and it doesn't really feel like a class class. You just have to have a whole bunch of self-motivation, and you have to be dedicated to do an online class.” Mariah developed a strategy to stay motivated. “I just put everything on my planner. You know, what I have to do today. ‘Okay, I'm going to get this done today, and you know, once I'm done with that, the next day, I'm going to get this done.’ So I just basically set goals every day. So when I get home, I'm like, ‘Okay, well now I'm home, I'm gonna shower, eat, and I'm going to get this assignment done, or I'm going to work a little bit on this assignment.’ Or I'll work on a large amount [of an] assignment so I can have the weekend, you know, to have free time,” she said.

Mariah said when she was tempted to hang out with her friends and not do her school work, her desire for a fulfilling career and economic mobility kept her on track. “I just remember how much I hate my job,” she said. “That's a big part of my motivation too. I don't like the job I'm at now, and I really want to get out of there. So I'm like, ‘Okay, this is the ticket to get out of my situation I'm in now. So I'm gonna just focus on that, do well in it [online classes], you know, and get better in life.’ I have a house and everything, and I already know how difficult it is to be able to pay your bills. So for that, I need a better paying job. So by me getting a better education, it gets me more income, which allows me to get more money to do more things than just living paycheck to paycheck. I've been through stuff, so I know that education is important,” she said.

Michelle

Michelle is 39 years old. She decided to attend community college to pursue her goal of becoming an entrepreneur. Online classes give her the flexibility she needs to work part-time as a child care provider, attend classes, and take care of her two teenage children. Right after high school, Michelle began working as a security officer and then in telemarketing. “I was making good money for a long time, so I kinda pushed school back a bit,” she said. “But after a while, it was just like, ‘Okay, it's time to move on and try to do something for yourself.’ I think I just got tired and was ready for a change.” One of Michelle’s co-workers was taking classes at the local community college and encouraged Michelle to do the same. “She was like, ‘You know, if you're interested in going back to school and you need help filling out the paperwork,’ she's like, she'll help me. It helped to motivate me to want to go.”

When Michelle began taking classes, she did not have trouble disciplining herself to do online coursework or using organizational and time management skills to be successful. Those things came easy to her. Therefore, when she encountered course content that was difficult to

understand, she did not hesitate to seek help. “Don't be afraid to take advantage of the online tutoring,” she said. “Seeking help doesn't mean that you're inadequate. It just means that you are smart enough to know when to ask for help.” In addition to tutoring services, Michelle’s instructors were also a helpful resource. “I really stress to students to form a relationship with their instructor. I usually contact my instructor right off the bat. I introduce myself, and I communicate with them through email, and I ask them what should I focus on, and I ask them [for] different tips I can use to help me to do better.”

Michelle identifies her relationship with God as the foundation for her success as an online learner. “I believe that [God] has helped me through a lot because there were a lot of times when I was sitting there like, ‘I need to figure this out. I need to figure this out,’” she said. “I pray a lot. That's the first thing I do. I'll find a quiet place to work, and I'll relax and take a deep breath, and I clear my mind, and I ask God to help me and open up my mind. I ask him to work through the keyboards, jump in my fingers, jump in my mind and say, ‘Give me the insight and the knowhow and the knowledge to help me to stay focused’ because it's hard to stay focused.”

When asked what causes her to persist in the face of challenges, Michelle stated, “I'm fighting for a better life. I want a degree, and I want to be the best in the field that I'm going to be pursuing. I want to be knowledgeable, and I want to be able to take whatever I decide to do all the way to the top.”

Renee

Renee is a 30-year-old mother of two boys, ages five and two. She works full-time as a delivery driver. Her goal is to pursue a career in the medical field. “I've been wanting to go to college since I was little,” she said. “I have some nurses and an actual doctor on my mom's side

of the family. So, growing up with that, I just wanted to go ahead and further my career also." Taking online classes helps Renee balance school with work and family responsibilities. "I'll be at work sometimes later than six o'clock," she said. "Trying to bounce from the job and going to class, it can be kind of overwhelming—and then to have kids. I'm not so good at finding babysitters," she said, laughing.

During her first semester at the community college, Renee took math and English developmental education classes online. She passed both classes with a "C." Renee was proud of herself for being able to pass the classes. "I couldn't believe it," she said. "But I pushed myself. I said, 'We're going to do this!'" However, Renee also took a psychology class online during her first semester. She earned a "D" in the class. "I was bummed," she said. "Let me tell you how I got that 'D.' I was working on the day of my final exam. I came home around nine. We got done kind of late. I came home, went straight to the Internet and I don't know what happened, but I was so sleepy and tired and sore. I fell asleep on my exam. If I hadn't fallen asleep on my exam, I probably would have passed that class."

One of the challenges that Renee faced with her online classes is that it was difficult to receive answers to questions from her instructors in a timely manner. "That's the part that I don't like about online," she said. "If you need help, you have to email them, and then, hopefully, they get back to you. But then when you ask a question, they probably don't understand what you're trying to say, and you're kind of lost because it's like, 'Dang, my teacher doesn't understand what I'm saying, but I need further information or further help on how to do this.' I couldn't talk to the instructor face-to-face." When Renee did not receive answers to her questions in time to submit her assignments, she turned to search engines and other resources online to find answers to her questions.

Renee said it was difficult to balance work, school, and family but that getting assignments done well in advance of the deadline was the strategy that helped her most in succeeding online. “My biggest secret is to get ahead,” she said. “I'll be like a week ahead of my assignments. I don't wait till the last minute. Do as much as possible so then you won't overwhelm yourself trying to catch up.” Renee said using this technique also gave her more time to study for quizzes and exams.

Renee explained that her love for school, her children, and her desire for upward mobility keep her motivated to achieve success in her online classes. “My future means a lot to me,” she said, “and it's going to mean a lot to my kids. That's the main thing I think about is my kids. I need to self-discipline and to teach my kids if I can do it, you can definitely do it. I don't want to work for, I don't want to call it chump change, but you know, I don't want to stay where I'm not really pleased and satisfied. I want to go ahead and get my career.”

Richard

Richard is 25 years old. He began taking college courses in high school through a dual credit program with the community college. He was an engineering major as he entered his freshman year at a state university. Despite having taken advanced calculus and being a high achiever in high school, he had trouble adjusting to college life and was placed on academic probation during his first year at the university. He pulled his grades up later that year but did not return for a second year because his family could no longer afford it. He took a 6-year hiatus from college to work and to become a caretaker for his ailing father. He returned to the community college as a nontraditional student, majoring in dietetics and nutrition.

Richard explained why online classes appealed to him. “For one, it allowed me to work at my own pace, and at the time, I was working pretty much full time,” he said. “I had two jobs at

the time. I was probably working around like 60 hours a week. So I knew that by taking [online classes] I can take one class during the first half of the semester and then the second half of the semester I can take another one just to get myself used to having to be in that environment, you know, learning."

When Richard needed help understanding course content, he turned to outside resources such as videos on the Internet. He explained why he did not opt to contact his instructor. "As somebody with a busy schedule working upwards of 60 hours, I had to use the most efficient tool to achieve. YouTube was just a click of a button," he said. "It's a great resource that all students should know about because if you can't understand what a tutor breaks down to you, sometimes it's just sitting down in front of a computer or your phone, tablet, whatever, and watching a video back, forward, slow motion, fast forward. It gives you more immersion. It helps you learn so much better," he said.

Richard is an honors student at the community college. He currently works two jobs for a total of 38 hours a week to support himself and to pay for his education. One job is in retail and the other is as a peer tutor. During his last semester at the community college, he was enrolled in 23 credit hours. Some of the nine online classes that he took that semester were at his transfer university.

Richard was also an officer in the community college's chapter of a national honors society. He said that his connection with that organization helped him cope with the racial injustice and police brutality that protesters brought to the forefront of America's consciousness in the summer of 2020. "As for the recent events due to police brutality, it disrupted my studying significantly after witnessing what happened," he said. "I took a break in my studies for about a week and turned to conversations with my peers and engaged in lengthy discussions with my

parents. I couldn't focus on much without reflecting on how this topic affects my peers and me, and its negative contribution to police-civilian tension. What has helped me the most is knowing that I have a platform with the honors society to pursue change." Richard worked with the honors society to produce a podcast series on police reform, which included interviews with prominent figures in the community to help educate listeners about the topic. Richard explained that his commitment to change and the prospect of helping others are what drive him to achieve success in school and life.

Sabrina

Sabrina is a 39-year-old veteran. She has a 22-year-old daughter. For the past 15 years, she has been a homemaker. She took advantage of a vocational rehabilitation program sponsored by the Veterans Administration. The program helped her navigate college admission, pay for college, and choose a major. Sabrina aspires to have a career in the social services field. She wants to help people connect with the resources they need, such as housing and employment. Sabrina decided to attend her local community college for a number of reasons. She does not have a car, and the college is close to home. In addition, her mother once worked at the college, and her sister took classes there.

Sabrina explained why online classes were the best choice for her. "I'm a disabled veteran and my daughter has some disabilities as well. So, with the combination of both things, there are times where I cannot attend classes, or it makes it a little more difficult for me to be able to walk around the building for a long time. Being at the school for 5 hours going back and forth from building to building, it's a lot sometimes for my body. Then I can do my work in the middle of the night or early in the morning or on the weekends. I can interact with my class whenever," she said.

In addition to a physical disability, Sabrina suffers from both PTSD and ADHD. Those two conditions presented formidable challenges for her as she took online classes. “With the PTSD, sometimes there are lapses in your thinking, so it was difficult to focus,” she explained. “I pushed through, but it was just a lot of different things to adjust to. When it comes down to organizing, that's when things get a little hairy, and it's more of an ADHD issue there. Sometimes, remembering assignments or due dates, I was double-checking or over-checking things, then I would get it all confused. I'm like, ‘Oh my God, I've looked at this assignment so many times. Is that the one from English class? Is that one due on the 27th, or is this one due?’ So, that was difficult,” she said.

Sabrina explained that she expected going back to school to be a challenge since she had been out of school for a long time. However, going back was even harder than she anticipated. She sought help from instructors and tutors when she did not understand the material, but other challenges arose for which she had to find a work-around. The Veterans Administration gave Sabrina a computer to use for school. She said it would malfunction at times, but it was better than nothing. In addition, she did not have broadband at home when she first began taking online classes. Therefore, Sabrina had to find a way to complete and submit her online assignments. “I would either take my computer around to different places to find a wifi or use the computer at school or sometimes piggyback off my daughter's data plan depending on what was going on,” she said. “A lot of the buses have wifi on them so sometimes I was able to do my work while I’m going home on a bus,” she explained. When asked what made her persist through all of the challenges, she stated, “You know, my parents were raised down South and they're very old school and born in the forties and the fifties. So, they gave me a real good ‘can do’ attitude and so I just tried to figure out the best way I could do what needed to be done. I just kept saying,

‘I'm going to figure out a way. I'm going to figure out a way.’” Sabrina managed to complete her assignments on time each week without internet service at home during her first semester in school. She later received broadband through a program for low-income students.

Sabrina shared that despite her success in completing her online assignments, there were times that she felt school was too difficult to continue. “There were a couple of times when I was just like, ‘I'm dropping out. I'm not going to be able to do it. I can't do it,’” she said. “And there would be times where I was like, ‘Well, I worked on that paper though. But I'm going to try to turn in that paper at least and then maybe next week, I'll write the teacher.’ The next week came, and I was working on another assignment, and it's like, ‘Okay, well maybe next week I'm going to tell him this,’” she said. Sabrina never told her professors that she was going to withdraw from school. She remained engaged in her studies and continued to complete assignments. She said she made it through those difficult times by relying on her family to encourage her to stay in school. She said more about her motivation. “To a certain extent, it's the motivation of my future goals and what I'm hoping to be able to do and how many people I'm hoping to be able to help,” she said. “There's an element of a role model for my daughter or my niece or nephew.” Sabrina also wants to make her parents proud of her. “I really just don't want to let them down,” she said. “I want them to feel like the work they put in was for a good reason.”

Sarah

Sarah is 21 years old. She attended a state university for a year but returned home to take classes at her community college to help her mother care for her four younger siblings. She is a psychology major planning to pursue a career in the mental health field. Sarah began taking online classes because she did not have transportation to travel to campus and take face-to-face

classes. “Online is definitely more flexible,” she said. “I do prefer to have that in-class, face-to-face contact still so I can ask questions when I wanted, but online was just a matter of convenience.”

Not taking classes on campus proved to be a challenge for Sarah. “Not having that face-to-face contact made me have to really take time to establish more discipline because it would be easy for me to forget that, ‘Oh, this particular assignment has to get done at this time’ or ‘Don't forget that you need to take actual time out to work on whatever project is due however many weeks later,’” she said. Sarah’s work and family obligations made it even more difficult for her to keep up with class assignments. Sarah works full-time in retail and takes a mix of online and face-to-face classes full-time. Two of the four siblings that she helps to care for have special needs. “If I'm not at work, I was at home trying to figure out, ‘Okay, how do I get my mind fixed on this work that I'm doing while there's one baby in the background screaming, one is hungry, one needs to get put in the tub?’ It was a very big challenge for me,” she said.

Sarah’s challenges began before she enrolled in college. She was educationally disadvantaged in high school, which left her feeling underprepared for higher education. “I actually had an IEP in high school,” she said. “But I wasn't being given the things that I needed, specifically. I wasn't given literally an individualized educational plan. I felt like I was just thrown in a box. My very first year of high school was very rough for me. I pretty much ended up failing all of my classes.”

Despite the obstacles that Sarah faced, she was able to find strategies to succeed at online learning. When she struggled with time management and procrastination, she consulted with some of the women in her church who had mastered managing their time and accomplishing their goals. She began using a planner to keep track of her online assignments and their

corresponding deadlines. She also found the learning management system's phone application helpful for staying organized.

Sarah's spiritual beliefs were another resource that helped her succeed by pushing her to do her best with everything she encountered. "The scriptures say, 'Whatsoever thou hand finds to do, do it with thy might,'" she quoted. "So if I'm doing something, I'm not gonna put half work into it, especially if it's something that I care about and it's something that's worth my time and I value it. I'm going to try to do my absolute best at it," she said.

Sarah explained how and why she succeeded at online learning despite the many obstacles in her path. "I didn't give up on myself," she said. "I knew that I had been through enough of the bad and gotten past it for me to say, it doesn't matter how many times I've failed. If I keep going, at some point, I know I can succeed if I just keep trying." Sarah said that one of the things that drives her to succeed is her goal to be a good influence on her siblings.

Themes Generated from the Research Interviews: Challenges

Students discussed the challenges they experienced while they engaged in online learning, the resources they used to overcome the challenges, and the strategies they employed to achieve success. The challenges they faced, discussed in this section of the chapter, included having difficulty understanding the course content, balancing multiple responsibilities, and needing to develop advanced self-directed learning skills. Feeling isolated in the online environment and the digital divide did not emerge as themes in the discussion of challenges.

Difficulty Understanding Course Content

Seven out of the 12 students expressed that, while taking online classes, there were times during which they had some difficulty understanding the course content. The students explained that this usually occurred when instructors were unavailable to answer questions in real time.

Renee explained that because understanding the material in certain classes is difficult, she prefers to take those classes face-to-face with an instructor present so that she can ask questions as she is learning the content.

> Honestly, if this wasn't going on, the whole coronavirus thing, I probably wouldn't have taken the Psychology 101 online again. I would have taken it on campus so I can start asking a lot of questions. I'm big on asking questions.

The lack of instructor presence in asynchronous online courses is documented in the literature. Salvo et al. (2017) found that Black online learners experienced a lack of instructor presence. In addition, Jaggars et al. (2013b) found, in a study of online courses at two community colleges, that students felt they had to teach themselves when they perceived that their online instructors were unavailable to answer questions concerning course content. The researchers noted that instructors being present in an online course to answer students' questions was the most important factor in helping students grasp the material and earn high grades. The researchers provided suggestions for how instructors could increase their presence in online courses, including the incorporation of live audio and video chats that allow instructors to respond to students' questions immediately. In addition, student ability to master course material is improved when instructors frequently post on discussion boards, invite student questions, and respond to them quickly.

Another reason students gave for not understanding course content was their perspective on the discipline covered in the class. It was more difficult for students to grasp course material to the extent that they felt academically unprepared to master the discipline under study or to the extent that the discipline was simply among their least favorite subjects. Mariah explained her feeling that math is not her strongest subject. She took a developmental education math class

online because she thought she remembered the material from high school. Ultimately, she struggled with the class online and later passed it when she took it in person.

> I dropped out of it because it's also the classes you take online. Like if you're not good at math, you shouldn't take math online…I'm like, yeah, I know how to do this. Yeah, I did this in high school. I tried to do it, and then it was just like overwhelming. Like, I couldn't remember some of the stuff. It's like I can remember some of it, but then again, I can't remember it. So, I just took the class thinking I was going to pass it 'cause it was easy math, but unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Mariah's experience is consistent with the literature that asserts that academically underserved students have higher levels of attrition and failure in online classes because they do not have the academic skills that will produce passing grades (Cochran et al., 2013; Davidson, 2017; Moore et al., 2002; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). But while Mariah did not pass her developmental math class online, five of the ten students in the current study who tested into developmental education classes actually took those classes online and passed them with a "C" or better. These students defied the odds and passed their developmental education courses online despite not having the academic proficiency to do so. Furthermore, all ten students in the current study who tested into developmental courses passed at least two online, asynchronous courses with grades of "C" or better, which is inconsistent with the literature and suggests that they are quite possibly positive deviants.

The students who tested into developmental education classes and later passed those classes or other courses in online formats said they did not find online learning more difficult. Nor did they indicate that they had more difficulty understanding course content because of their academic disadvantage. Irene tested into developmental English and math. She said the academic

disadvantage derived from her being improperly homeschooled and then placed into the wrong math classes when she finally began attending her neighborhood high school. When asked if the academic disadvantage made online learning more difficult, she said the opposite was true—taking classes online made it easier for her to learn the material.

> No, they're [online classes] not too much of a challenge. I know I mentioned before, it's [online learning] pretty much my safety net, and I can do everything on my own time. So if anything, it gave me just a little bit more leeway of learning so that I don't have to worry about being at the same pace of other students. I could just learn on my own time, basically figure out and do problems on my own time instead of exposing myself to the class.

Maria, who tested into developmental math and college-level English, said that she did not have more difficulty understanding the course content in her online developmental math class. She passed it with a "C" or better. While the academic disadvantage did not impact her progress in math, she felt that taking reading-intensive classes was more difficult in online formats than in traditional classroom formats even though she does not have an academic disadvantage in English and reading. Maria agreed with Renee in stating that the heavy reading classes were more difficult to take online because the instructor was not present to help her make sense of the material.

> Math wasn't too difficult because it's a very straightforward concept. You learn formulas and then you apply that and so forth. But other classes like sociology and history, they are a lot more difficult because you have to do a lot more reading and interpret the readings on your own.

Maria's comment brought the discussion about barriers to understanding online course content full circle. Maria, Renee and other students agreed that the instructor's physical absence was the main reason they had difficulty understanding the course content online. In general, being academically disadvantaged did not make online learning more difficult for these students. Salvo et al. (2017) argued that academically underserved students are less likely to be successful in online courses because they are heavily dependent upon reading and writing as the primary methods of instructional delivery. However, Maria's experience of heavy reading as a challenge in online classes, even for a student who is proficient in reading and writing, indicates that it is not always the academic skill set that makes understanding online course content difficult for students. It is the absence of the instructor that makes it so.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

The second most prevalent challenge expressed by the successful Black online learners in this study was balancing work, school, and family responsibilities. Six of the twelve students explained that having so many responsibilities outside of schoolwork threatened their ability to complete assignments and tests. This finding is consistent with the literature regarding attrition in online learning. In a study of community college students who had failed or withdrawn from an online class, Moore et al. (2002) found that one of the top three reasons cited by students who withdrew from online classes was the difficulty of balancing coursework with their other responsibilities.

One study participant in my study, Renee, attested to the challenge of balancing multiple responsibilities while trying to complete online coursework. Renee has two children, ages five and two. She works full-time as a delivery truck driver. She recounted the circumstances that led to her earning a low grade in one of her online classes.

> Let me tell you how I got that "D". I was working on the day of my final exam. I came home like around nine. We got done kind of late. I came home, went straight to the Internet, and I don't know what happened, but I was so sleepy and tired and sore. I fell asleep on my exam. If I hadn't fallen asleep on my exam, I probably would have passed that class.

Rovai (2003) explained that for nontraditional (students age 24 and older) commuter students, work and family obligations often negatively impact persistence. The author drew from Tinto's model of student departure and Bean and Metzner's student attrition model to create a composite model that predicts persistence and attrition among nontraditional students who are online learners. Rovai's (2003) model combines the two aforementioned models, which describe factors that impact students who take face-to-face classes, and incorporates what Bean and Metzner refer to as *environmental variables* to articulate a set of factors that influence attrition and persistence for nontraditional online learners. Environmental variables, or as Rovai (2003) labels them, *external factors*, are issues that are not related to school and that may negatively impact students' ability to focus on their studies and earn passing grades. These factors include hours of employment and family responsibilities. Rovai (2003) posited that work and family obligations might lead to student attrition because these concerns often reduce the amount of time students have to devote to academics. The author stressed that having enough time to complete assignments each week, a challenge for those with work and family obligations, is required for success in online courses.

Renee described having to work late, sometimes going straight from work to an on-campus class, and having to care for her children without family support or childcare as "overwhelming." Alice can relate to Renee's experience. She has toddler twin boys. Although

she lives with her sister, her sister's career as a surgeon leaves Alice home alone with her children on most nights. Her parents help when they can, but she said they primarily offer moral support. She stated that her many responsibilities interfere with her schoolwork.

> You know, there's the life challenges that get in the way [of school work]. So you know I have twins, I'm a single mother. I work, so, you know, there's always those added distractions. I keep up with my home. I cook dinner almost every single night. It's a lot of things that I do. My kids have doctor's appointments and they get sick and everything.

Lee and Choi (2011) explained that online learners' level of support from family members, friends, and others is a strong predictor of persistence in their coursework. When students do not have a strong support system to help them with childcare and other life challenges, attrition is more likely. In their review of online course attrition research over a 10-year period, Lee and Choi also found that online learners who worked full-time were less likely to persist until completion of their coursework. These students were challenged to stretch their time to meet work, family, and school obligations. They were often unsuccessful at meeting the challenge.

All of the students in the study took a mix of both online and on-campus classes. One of the only ways they could juggle work, school, and family was to stay up late into the night to complete their assignments. April chronicled her routine and explained how she gets schoolwork done.

> Sometimes I have class from 6:00 pm to 9:30 pm, two days a week. When I get out of class, I will get my daughter and then go home and do homework. Sometimes I'll be up until 6:00 in the morning. But on the days that I didn't have class, I come home from

work and do homework or try to cook and then do homework. Typically I was up all night doing homework.

April's experience of only having time to do homework late at night because of work and family responsibilities is akin to what undergraduate and graduate women reported in Müller's (2008) study of factors that influence persistence in online degree-completion programs. The women explained that between work and caring for small children, they could only turn their focus to schoolwork after the children were in bed, and by that time, they were exhausted. The women reported being overwhelmed by multiple responsibilities and identified the aforementioned as the leading barrier to persistence.

Sarah does not have any children of her own, but having to take care of her four younger siblings, two of whom have special needs, in addition to working full-time and going to school full-time, makes it difficult for her to focus on her course work. She painted a picture of the chaos that she manages while trying to complete assignments.

> I have to step up to help a lot within my household. So that took a lot of my energy. It consumed a lot of my mind and where my focus needed to be. So when you don't have the resources, the support system, to where you can actually focus on your studies, with me being in school and balancing, not only online but also balancing work, basically everyone is molding their life around each other within the household. So if I'm not at work, if I'm not at my classes that were actually being held at the actual school, I was at home trying to figure out, "Okay, how do I get my mind fixed on this work that I'm doing while there's one baby in the background screaming, one is hungry, one needs to get put in the tub," you know, so it was a very big challenge for me.

Sarah's story of balancing an overwhelming number of responsibilities with a thin support system, while trying to achieve success in her online classes, encapsulated the experience of so many of the students. She described a philosophy that offers an explanation for how all of the students succeeded: "There's a matter of consistency that plays into it and I know that the strongest survive."

Developing More Advanced Self-Directed Learning Skills

Black collegians in the current study had sufficient time management and organizational skills to succeed in face-to-face classes. However, they explained that they had to develop a more nuanced set of time management and organizational skills to succeed in their online classes. Doing so was a challenge because they did not anticipate having to modify a skill set that they already possessed. They had to advance their skills because of the nature of taking classes in the online environment. The students found that they needed to keep track of assignment deadlines to avoid losing points from failing to submit assignments or take exams. They defined the aforementioned task as an organizational skill while time management skills were defined as finding the time to study and complete assignments in the face of work and family responsibilities. Students eventually kept track of assignment deadlines by writing them down in a planner or using an electronic application for that purpose.

Irene explained how she found assignment deadlines confusing and difficult to track until she managed to modify the organizational skills she already had and adjust them for online learning.

> I think when I first started online, it was a little bit overwhelming for me because due dates were really weird and scary. I took three different classes. But then the due dates within the class are completely different because, of course, you're not on a typical in-

person schedule. So it's not like Monday, Wednesday, whatever. It's just like, okay, well, there's something due this day and this day, and they're all very, very, very different, and so it was a little overwhelming for me. I remember I missed an exam or two, once…But then basically, I just buckled down so that the next semester, you know, I learned how to keep track of all of my assignments. I learned how to check the calendars frequently 'cause I know sometimes professors change things. I learned how to basically stay organized.

In addition to the difficulty of developing organizational skills, students expressed that they had to learn how to manage their time or plan when they would engage with the course material through reading, studying, posting to discussion boards, writing essays, or taking exams. Developing time management skills was difficult for students, in part, because of their other time commitments. Cindy expounded on that challenge.

I found it difficult to be available to do my work with my busy schedule, with the kids and then full-time job, and then house duties. I rarely found myself studying. And just because it was an online class, it was like, okay, you really have a date where you have to turn all this information in. So I'll wait last minute just to turn it in. That was my first year. Well, my first online classes. Now it's totally different. Even though you think like, "Oh, I have time," you shouldn't wait. You should just do it right then. It should be your first priority. Not your second, not your last. It should always be your first.

Students articulated a number of reasons that developing time management and organizational skills for online learning was difficult. First, they had to balance a number of responsibilities that left them with little time to fit in studying and complete online assignments. Second, the matter of deadlines in the online environment was strange to students. They were

accustomed to submitting assignments to the instructor when they meet for class face-to-face. The class meeting time marked the assignment deadline for students in the face-to-face class. Also, the instructor in the face-to-face class reminded students of deadlines as they approached. With online learning, there was a perception by students that they have no assistance in keeping track of assignment deadlines. Although the instructor in the online class listed assignment deadlines in the syllabus and perhaps on a calendar in the learning management system (LMS) or even by posting reminders about the deadlines in the announcement section of the LMS, the students found it challenging to keep track of the deadlines and had to devise a system to do so. As Richard explained,

> When it comes to online courses, I would say it's just time management, and that's another big hurdle that a lot of students have to overcome because, in a traditional course, time management happens with the course block. So within your schedule, whether it's four o'clock or eight o'clock in the morning when that time comes, you expect to have your homework with you or expect to have everything. But in an online course, that visual reminder of being in that course does not click to you, and you don't have that instructor who's right there in your face telling you, “Okay, students, tomorrow we meet again, bring in your coursework, your exam is due next week.” So without that visual reminder, you have to be more disciplined in that online setting.

Sarah agreed with Richard that not being in a traditional class requires students to be self-disciplined.

> But there was a matter of me not having that face-to-face contact; it made me have to really take time to establish more discipline because it would be easy for me to forget that, “Oh! This, particular assignment has to get done at this time” or “Don't forget that

you need to take actual time out to work on whatever project is due however many weeks later," because we didn't have the in-class face-to-face contact [where] you're getting reminders constantly every time you go. And even just the thought of, "Hey, I have class tomorrow or in two days or three days." That makes you think about what it is you have to get done for that class.

Rovai's (2003) research validated the students' experiences of taking on more responsibility and disciplining themselves to manage their time and keep track of deadlines in online classes. The author asserted that if students are not self-disciplined, independent learners who can direct themselves to manage their time in the absence of the prompts that face-to-face meetings and instructors provide, they will not likely succeed in online courses. In his composite model of persistence in online learning, Rovai lists time management as a required skill that students must possess prior to enrolling in online courses. He points out that not having this specialized skill could lead to a lack of academic progress and attrition.

Xu and Jaggars (2014) included time management, self-discipline, and motivation in a set of metacognitive skills that the authors contend are necessary for success as online learners assume greater responsibility for their learning. The researchers situate the aforementioned skills within a broader rubric of skills that comprise *self-directed learning*. Xu and Jaggars (2014) affirmed the experience of students in the current study, and explained that not all online students have advanced time management and other self-directed learning skills as they embark upon digital learning. The authors suggest that students may need institutional support in building self-directed learning skills to succeed in online courses.

Themes Generated from the Research Interviews: Non-Challenges

A number of scholars have noted that online learners experience feelings of isolation (Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Rovai, 2003; Salvo et al., 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Rovai (2007) explained that the physical separation of students from each other and the instructor, in the online environment, is at odds with the human need for social and intellectual interaction, which causes students to feel isolated and alienated. The author asserted that feelings of isolation can be problematic for Black and other students whose cultural values include affect, cooperation, community, socialization, and other field dependent qualities. However, feeling isolated from peers and instructors was not a theme among most students in the current study. Results were mixed, with some of the students stating that they did feel isolated in their online classes, while others expressed that they did not. Mariah was one of the students who experienced isolation.

> Even though we did have discussion posts and everything, it still doesn't feel like I interact with them. It was basically like a solo individual thing. So if somebody is fine with getting their work done and not dealing with other people then an online class would be great.

Alex also missed socializing and interacting with peers and instructors in person.

> Sometimes I do miss the face-to-face connection or interacting with other peers. You kind of do interact with other peers online, but it's just like you're just responding to their posts or their comment. I felt like that's not really getting to know your peers or teacher at all.

However, Alice did not feel isolated. She described her perspective regarding her interactions with instructors and peers in the online environment.

> I can't really say that I felt isolated. I feel like most of the teachers that I had did a pretty good job at making sure they answered questions in a reasonable amount of time. As far as my classmates, I've never talked to anybody in [face-to-face] class anyway.

April was another student who described an experience in which she did not feel isolated:

> We had to be very engaged. Each week we had to respond to the discussions, post in the discussions, and there was no isolation at all. The teacher posted announcements every week. There was not a lot of isolation.

Overall, three students felt isolated in online classes and two students had the opposite experience. The other seven students did not directly comment about the topic, one way or the other. Feeling isolated did not emerge as a prominent challenge among the participants in this study

Nor did the digital divide emerge as a challenge. Scholars have asserted that a lack of access to a reliable computer and broadband at home, as well as a lack of educational technology skills, contribute to lower online course persistence rates and lower grades among Black online learners (Fairlie, 2012; Merrills, 2010; Moore, 2014; Moore et al., 2002; Salvo et al., 2017). But most students in the current study were not challenged by access to technology, and none of the students lacked the educational technology skills needed to navigate a learning management system.

All the students in the study had a computer at home, but two of them, April and Sabrina, were without high-speed internet service for a portion of their online studies. April completed her online assignments on the computers at school after she finished her shift at work until she could afford to purchase broadband for her home. Sabrina also completed assignments at school

and on the bus (which had wifi) on her way home until she was able to secure broadband through a program for economically disadvantaged households.

Regarding the computer literacy or educational technology skills needed to succeed in online courses, the college mandated that new online learners complete a brief orientation module that introduced them to the learning management system and taught them how to navigate it. Students stated that the module was somewhat helpful but that they learned how to navigate the LMS on their own by clicking on the various links and tabs until they understood how to post to the discussion board, submit assignments, etc. None of the students stated that it was a challenge for them to navigate the educational technology in their online courses.

Themes Generated from the Research Interviews: Resources Used to Succeed

During the interviews, the students mentioned several resources they employed to succeed in their online courses. These included internet sources, instructors, grit, academic motivators and *jugaad,* which is a Hindi term used to describe problem solving skills. Each of these resources is discussed below.

Internet Sources

Internet technology that essentially brings an instructor in front of students to answer questions was the primary resource employed by students to overcome difficulties in understanding course content. Seven of the twelve students used YouTube, Google, and other internet resources to view lectures, problem demonstrations, and other content to improve their understanding of course material. Maria explained how using the Internet helped her.

> Psychology first semester and currently sociology have been two of my most difficult classes. It was a combination of using what the teacher provided us and also having to

use the Internet to find the information or find it in like simpler terms for me to understand.

Irene agreed and stated that she turned to internet resources to help her understand the content in her math class.

I think I've had difficulty understanding the math 'cause math is literally my least favorite subject in the world. I did not seek tutoring through the school, but I basically just went on YouTube, watched videos on the problems I was working on or whatever chapter I was on; I would just look it up or look up different resources on how to get better at it.

The majority of the students consistently chose internet resources over tutoring or emailing the instructor when they did not understand the course material. Richard explained that many students opt for internet resources because they are readily available and they help students learn the material better.

So as somebody with a busy schedule working upwards of 60 hours, a big thing for me was that I did not feel comfortable in obstructing my work schedule to meet with my academic schedule. So I had to use the most efficient tool to achieve, and YouTube was just a click of a button. It's a great resource that I believe that all students should know about because if you feel like your instructor online is not to your liking or if you can't understand what a tutor breaks down to you, sometimes it's just having all the free time in the world, sitting down in front of a computer or your phone, tablet, whatever, and watching a video back, forward, slow motion, fast forward, you know. It gives you kind of more immersion. It allows you to be more vulnerable in a situation because vulnerability, especially for minority students, it's one of those big hurdles that you just need to get over. Sometimes, being vulnerable in front of your computer versus being

vulnerable in front of a professor or instructor or something like that is a totally different dynamic. So by having the option to be in front of your computer, being in your own personal space and just learning in a controlled environment with your personal instructor [the video] who you always know you can rewind and go back and forth, piece together a certain sentence that you might not have got the first time, it helps you learn so much better.

While Richard pointed out that using internet resources prevents him from disrupting his 60-hour a week work schedule to seek tutoring or get help from an instructor, Irene explained that internet resources are more immediate when a student is trying to meet a same-day deadline.

This [internet resources] is something that's always there. You know you don't have to wait for somebody to reply to you. You don't have to set up an appointment. It's just like if you're wanting to do your homework at three o'clock in the morning and you have issue with this, or you know, it's a deadline for 11:59, and it's like literally 10 o'clock, and you have to get it done, you don't have to wait to call your teacher or email or whatever. You can literally just look it up right then and there and get the help that you need.

The finding that students used internet search engines and YouTube videos to help them better understand course material is consistent with the literature regarding college students' use of internet tools for academic purposes. Buzzetto-More (2015) surveyed over 200 students at an HBCU to investigate student perceptions regarding embedded YouTube videos in fully online, hybrid, and web-assisted in-person Business courses. The purpose of the author's study was to examine the effectiveness of YouTube videos when incorporated by instructors into a course as an instructional aid as opposed to students finding the videos independently to help them better understand course material. Participants in the study agreed that the instructor-vetted videos

enhanced their understanding of the course content and helped them learn. Buzzetto-More (2015) stated that the finding in her study is consistent with the extant literature in the field asserting that YouTube videos curated by instructors help students engage more deeply with the course material and help them retain the information for a longer period of time. The author claimed that, according to the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, videos aid students in knowledge construction and memory building. She stated that digital natives (i.e., students born around or after 1985) learn best when both the auditory and visual centers of the brain are stimulated by multi-media technology that allows students to navigate back and forth through the content at their own pace. It is interesting to note that Richard, a participant in my study who was born in 1995, mentioned that being able to rewind YouTube videos and review them at his own pace over and over again on his computer helped him learn course material "so much better."

Buzzetto-More (2015) further stated that digital natives view more content on the Internet, whether academic or not, than on any other medium. She also asserted that the population views internet technologies as essential to the process of gathering information with a preference for user-generated content or media that is created and posted by a user to a website, the most prominent being YouTube. The author stated that YouTube is the world's largest video sharing service and the second most popular search engine with over 6 billion hours of video watched monthly by over 1 billion monthly viewers. Due to the popularity of the platform, college students are familiar with it and consume its content. Buzzetto-More (2015) found that 98% of her mostly African-American study participants had used YouTube prior to the study, and 68% used the internet resource for academic purposes.

Though there are studies about students' use of YouTube as a way of understanding course content independently (i.e., without the instructor choosing and posting the video as an

instructional aid for a course), those studies focus largely on non-Black racial groups. Buzzetto-More (2015) explained that only about 16% of all literature regarding YouTube pertains to the discipline of education. Of those studies, few investigate the impact of YouTube on student learning. Most are conducted at PWIs rather than at HBCUs where large populations of Black college students are found. The author claimed that her study about using YouTube in teaching and learning is the first known study of its kind conducted at an HBCU.

Though Buzzetto-More's (2015) study provides evidence that YouTube videos can help Black students improve their understanding of course content and that Black students often find and use YouTube videos for academic purposes, the students' use of the video-sharing service resulted from their instructor curating a set of videos and posting them in the learning management system for students to consume. The students studied by Buzzetto-More did not search for YouTube videos independently. In contrast, Shimray and Ramiah (2019) examined the independent use of YouTube for academic purposes by 150 students at Pondicherry University in India. Half of the research participants were undergraduates, and the majority of the students were in their early 20s. The authors agree with Buzzetto-More (2015) that digital natives seek web-based educational resources to enhance subject knowledge. They also agree that students learn better and faster with videos that provide both auditory and visual stimuli together rather than words alone. Shimray and Ramiah (2019) asked research participants to complete a survey, which determined that students watch YouTube videos to help them complete assignments, study for examinations, gain different perspectives on subject matter from experts in the discipline, and enhance their understanding of course material. Students also indicated that the content they consumed on YouTube helped improve their grades. Thus, whether students watch YouTube

videos that are integrated into classroom learning or seek them out independently, the video-sharing service improves their understanding of the course material.

In addition to watching YouTube videos, students in my study stated that they used search engines such as Google to gather information that would advance their understanding of the course content. This finding is consistent with the literature examining student use of the Internet to engage in information searching. Jones et al. (2008) surveyed over 7,000 students at 29 public and private colleges and universities across the United States. One hundred percent of the students in the survey reported using the Internet to search for information. Ninety-five percent of the students preferred to gather information using search engines such as Google and Yahoo!

Instructors

While most of the students I interviewed used internet resources to receive answers to their questions about course content, some turned to their instructors to answer their questions. Cindy explained how she depended on her biology instructor to help her understand the material in her online laboratory course during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> My professor opened his availability to answer all of the student questions and concerns, and I took great advantage of that. Every time I was confused or had a question, I would email my professor, and he would schedule a face-to-face session and explain course assignments until I understood the concept.

Michelle also relied on instructors to help her understand the material. She made it a practice to contact her instructors early and often to maximize her online course performance.

> I take my time, and if I don't understand something, I really don't have a problem with asking the instructor. I usually contact my instructor right off the bat. I introduce myself

and I communicate with them through email and I ask them what should I focus on and I ask them for different tips I can use to help me to do better.

The literature on academic help-seeking among Black students reveals that they often forego asking White faculty members questions about instructional material out of fear of confirming negative stereotypes that Black students are intellectually inferior and incapable of high academic achievement (Wood, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015). However, Thompson et al. (2019) conducted a study of over one hundred Black students at a minority serving institution (MSI) and found that Black students are more comfortable seeking help from professors for academic assistance when the students have a sense of belonging at the institution. The authors asserted that one of the ways students feel connected to the institution is through their experiences with supportive faculty and other institutional representatives. The fact that some of the students in my study sought out help from instructors may suggest that they had positive experiences with faculty or other college personnel prior to taking their online classes.

Grit

The resource that students utilized to aid them in balancing work, school, and family obligations is the study's defining resource. The students identified their determination, ability to persist, or tenacity as the element that enabled them to overcome one of their most difficult challenges. It is commonly stated that the reason students decide to take online classes—to help them manage the demands placed on their time by work, school and family obligations—becomes the reason that they fail online classes; they simply do not have the time to juggle work, school, and family obligations. Indeed, students in the current study stated that the aforementioned was why they enrolled in online classes. They did not have time to spend several hours a week on campus, after working a full day and having caretaking responsibilities at home.

Therefore, the students took a combination of online and traditional face-to-face courses to ease the constraints on their time. Taking some online classes allowed students to pursue their coursework at home, cutting their required time on campus. But they still found that work and caretaking responsibilities consumed the majority of their time and left them exhausted. There was little time left for schoolwork.

The students solved this problem by pushing themselves to read, study, and complete online course assignments in the midst of their fatigue. Even though their other duties had depleted their energy, they often stayed up late into the night completing course work. Given their superficial support systems, the students rarely had childcare or eldercare as a resource to lean on while they tended to their studies. This meant that students had to wait until their loved ones were asleep for the night, after cooking, cleaning, and a hard day's work, to finally sit down and engage with course content. The students tapped into an internal resource, their sheer determination to succeed, which made the difference between course success and withdrawal or failure. When asked what made them push through the fatigue and stress that resulted from managing so many responsibilities simultaneously, the students pointed out this resource.

The PD framework seeks to discover the uncommon attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of positive deviants. Tenacity or determination and the ability to persist in the face of obstacles are the characteristics the students shared. April identified what helps her get her school work done while working full-time and raising her 3-year-old daughter: "If you have the self-discipline and the determination to get it [the course work] done, it'll get done. I guess that's what I have because it always gets done."

Cindy has three small children and works 10-hour shifts, four days a week. She described the self-discipline and determination at work in her efforts to complete online coursework. Still, she admits that it is not always easy to call upon those internal resources.

> Sometimes it is hard 'cause I don't always feel motivated. Like, "Oh great, let me go do some homework." Sometimes I'm like "Ok, I gotta get up and do what I have to do to get this homework." I don't always feel motivated, but at the end of the day it's like I'm only gonna get one shot. I'm not trying to fail a class, re-do a class.

Cindy also stated that her determination to succeed requires that she prioritize her school work and find ways to, simultaneously, take care of her other responsibilities.

> I put my education as my first priority. Sometimes I put it above my kids. Sometimes, I'll just, "Okay. You know, what, y'all go in the room [to watch a movie]. I need to study." In order for you to succeed in any of your classes, you have to do the work. You have to be committed. You don't have to want to do the work, but you just have to do it.

Cindy further explained that balancing work, family, and school became more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. She had to take a class online that she would have otherwise taken face-to-face. She disclosed that there were times when she wanted to give up and drop the class, but she persisted.

> My biology class was the most challenging class I have yet to encounter. I had to study, study, study! Due to the Coronavirus, all lab exercises were held online only. It was really tough and confusing… It was the end of the semester but the assignments started to become harder. I wanted to give up so bad, but I was almost finished with the course so I continued to study.

Sarah, who contended with a full-time work schedule, caring for four younger siblings, and a full-time course load, had not always performed as well as she would have liked in her classes. However, she persevered in her online classes, determined to achieve her educational goals.

> I didn't give up on myself. I knew that I had been through enough of the bad and gotten past it for me to say, “It doesn't matter how many times I've failed. If I keep going, at some point, I know I can succeed if I just keep trying.” I didn't want to let myself down. I set a goal for myself that, “Hey, I'm going to get here no matter how long it takes.”

Sarah explained that having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in high school made her feel like she would never reach her goals, but her spiritual beliefs inspired her to pursue her dreams with fervor.

> I had already had an IEP before, and it also went into my college years. It really took a toll on me. It made me feel like I was unworthy or I wasn't ever going to reach that point. But that's also a point where my spirituality again came into play…The scriptures say, “Whatsoever thou hand finds to do, do it with thy might.” So if I'm doing something, I'm not gonna put half work into it. Especially if it's something that I care about and it's something that's worth my time and I value it. I'm going to try to do my absolute best at it. Invest in it, even if I do fall short or come short of my goals. So my spirituality played into it because it pretty much gave me that extra push to always do my best with everything that I encounter.

Sabrina, a veteran who suffers from physical disabilities and mental illness, became discouraged when she had to balance her challenges with school and caring for an adult daughter with disabilities. There were times when she had decided to drop her classes but kept doing

assignments and never told her instructors that she was going to withdraw. She endured and remained in the classes.

> Trying to juggle everything else that you have to do, it was really stressful. There were points where it was just more like one foot in front of the other, and any encouraging word from anybody was a help. There was a couple of times where I was just like, "I'm dropping out. I'm not going to be able to do it. I can't do it." And there would be times where I was like, "Well, I worked on that paper, though. I'm going to try to turn in that paper at least, and then maybe next week I'll write the teacher [to tell him she planned to drop the class]." The next week came, and I was working on another assignment, and it's like, "Okay, well, maybe next week I'm going to tell him this."

Sabrina never dropped her classes. She attributes her determined spirit to her upbringing.

> You know, my parents were raised down South, and they're very old school and born in like the forties and the fifties. So they gave me a real good "can-do" attitude. So I just tried to figure out the best way I could do what needed to be done…I just kept saying, "I'm going to figure out a way. I'm going to figure out a way."

Students in the current study called the internal resource responsible for their success in overcoming the formidable challenge of managing multiple responsibilities "determination," being "committed" to their goals, "self-discipline" and a "can-do attitude." All of this is subsumed in what Duckworth et al. (2007) call *grit*, which they define as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failures, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). The students in the current study embody grit in their sustained efforts to accomplish their goals, despite facing challenges that other students find insurmountable. Grit was the

noncognitive trait at work when April stayed up all night to complete assignments after working all day, attending on-campus classes, and taking care of her daughter. Grit was when Cindy pushed herself to complete a laboratory science course online during a pandemic and when Sabrina, struggling with her coursework, managing her own and her daughter's disabilities, never got around to dropping any of her classes because she was too busy engaging in the effort to succeed in them.

The finding that the students' grit contributed to their triumph over the challenge of balancing work, school, and family responsibilities and led to success in their online courses is consistent with the literature. Buzzetto-Hollywood et al. (2019) explained that the body of literature examining grit's contribution to student success in online learning is small and still in its infancy. The author further stated that there is a significant gap in the literature in that there are few studies that investigate grit and student performance among Black collegians. Buzzetto-Hollywood et al. (2019) revealed that the majority of studies that have examined grit and college student achievement in online learning have found a positive relationship between the two variables. In other words, the higher the students' score on the standard 12-item Grit Scale, the better their academic performance in online courses.

Gritty e-learners were able to overcome obstacles, demonstrate self-control, and achieve their long-term goals. However, Buzzetto-Hollywood et al.'s (2019) quantitative study of the relationship between grit and student performance in online classes at an HBCU did not confirm a positive relationship between grit scores and grades—a finding that, according to Buzzetto-Hollywood, has been mirrored in studies of high school students. Buzzetto-Hollywood et al. (2019) admitted that the negative confirmation of her hypothesis is not consistent with the preponderance of studies regarding grit and online student success in higher education.

Academic Motivators

The students in the current study had grit that was fueled by their motivation to succeed or their reason for attending college. They explained that they had several motivators, including their desire to complete their degree program, achieve their occupational goals, earn more money, support their children, serve as role models for family members, and make their family members proud of them. Several of the students named a combination of the aforementioned motivations. Mariah, for example, explained that she wants to earn a degree so that she can secure a better paying job.

> I have a house and everything and I already know how difficult it is to be able to pay your bills. So for that, I need a better paying job. And you know, you can get a better paying job without the education, but education makes it easier. So by me getting a better education, it gets me more income, which allows me to get more money to do more things than to just live paycheck to paycheck.

Mariah also revealed that she views higher education as the key to obtaining a job that she enjoys.

> I just remember how much I hate my job. That's a big part of my motivation too. I don't like the job I'm at now, and I really want to get out of there! So I'm like, okay, this [education] is the ticket to get out of my situation I'm in now.

Mariah's desire to persist in her online coursework so that she can achieve her career goals and gain upward economic mobility is consistent with the literature examining academic motivation in African-American students and online learners. Müller (2008) conducted a qualitative case study of undergraduate and graduate women to examine the factors that affected their persistence to graduation in online degree programs. Participants in the study identified the

desire for better job opportunities and higher pay as factors that motivated them to persist until graduation.

This was reflected in my interviews with Alice, who expressed her desire to earn a degree as a way of achieving her career goals and supporting her children.

> I feel that I am successful because of what motivates me to do well. I mean, I'm a mom now, so my success is also my children's success. So that is a motivating thing that keeps me going even when I wanted to go to bed at 10 o'clock, but I still had to stay up and do homework. But in the end, it will be worth it. That's a major motivation. Another thing is I'm also doing it for myself. You know, like I want to be successful in life. I want to eventually be the human resources director for a chain of hotel properties because I work in hospitality right now. I have my own goals that I want to reach.

She further explained that what is motivating her is the life that she sees for herself and her family in the future, so she makes a sacrifice now to realize her vision.

> My philosophy is like, if I work hard now, lose sleep now, do everything that I need to get done now, by the time my children are in kindergarten, I should be set up. I should be in my career. And things should be easier, like living on my own and have everything on my own by then. That's my mindset right now.

These comments reflect the findings of a mixed-methods study undertaken by Miles (2009) to understand the factors motivating Black undergraduate women to return to college. Miles found that 55% of the women were pursuing credentials to improve their job prospects and their financial stability. In addition, 51% of the women held earning a degree as a personal goal. They wanted to achieve a sense of accomplishment for themselves and have a career they enjoyed. Finally, 26% of the women persevered to earn their degree to provide a better life for

their children and serve as a role model to impress upon them the importance of not giving up when challenges threaten to derail goal achievement.

Renee's aspirations to support her children, earn more money, and pursue a career are aligned with the motivators that Alice discussed and that the literature supports.

> So what motivated me is having kids. That's what really boosted me up to want to go ahead and get all my education and really staying on point and stay focused. I don't want to work for, I don't want to call it chump change, but you know, I don't want to stay in that little area where I'm not really pleased and satisfied. I want to go ahead and get my career.

Renee also looks to the future for motivation. In addition, she wants her children to learn a lesson from her accomplishments.

> My future means a lot to me and it's going to mean a lot to my kids. That's the main thing I think about is my kids. I need to discipline myself and teach my kids that if I can do it, you can definitely do it.

While the majority of the students in the study stated that the goals of personal and family advancement motivated them to achieve academically, Sabrina explained that she was also motivated by her desire to impact the lives of people in need of social services. "To a certain extent, it's the motivation of my future goals and what I'm hoping to be able to do and how many people I'm hoping to be able to help." This reflects the findings of a study conducted by Mwangi et al. (2017) to determine how families influence the academic motivations of Black college students. A number of the study participants were driven to succeed in college to gain the skills needed to, one day, reinvest in their community.

Another aspect of student motivation that emerged in my interviews related to the students' family ties was the desire to make family members proud of their accomplishments. Maria explained that she strives to do well in school to make her grandparents proud of her.

> My mom is just a single mom. So they [her grandparents] were also a major part of my life. They always want to see me become what I've always wanted to be, which is a veterinarian. So I kind of do what I do to make them proud as well.

Sabrina agreed, stating that she wants to make her parents proud of her: "I really just don't want to let them down. I want them to feel like the work they put in was for a good reason and it came to fruition."

The students' desire to make their family members proud of them is consistent with the findings in the study conducted by Mwangi et al. (2017). Participants in that study explained that they did not want to disappoint their family members who had high expectations of them and their academic pursuits. Their desire to make their family members proud of them drove them to ensure that they always fulfilled their academic responsibilities.

Jugaad

Although students in the current study needed help developing self-directed learning skills, most of them did not reach out to instructors or the school's retention specialists to receive that help. In fact, only one student received help from an instructor who taught the entire class how to manage their time and stay on top of deadlines. Another student Googled time management and organizational skills and consulted friends who helped her master the skills. The rest of the students relied upon an internal resource—their intuition and problem-solving ability, which led them to teach themselves the skills they needed to succeed. Renee explained how the idea for managing her time to complete assignments prior to the deadline came to her.

> To be honest with you, it's just something I thought of. I don't know; it's just something that just came up in my head. “Okay. I'm going to get it done. It'll be better [to complete assignments in advance of the deadline], so I can have more time to study [for tests and quizzes], especially with having kids.”

The students explained that they figured out on their own, through intuition and trial and error, to use a planner to track assignment deadlines and to put themselves on a schedule to complete coursework in advance of due dates. When they missed deadlines or found themselves stressed from procrastinating to complete assignments, their common sense and intuition led them to do things differently.

> Irene describes the process that she went through to develop organizational skills. Basically, by trial and error. A lot of it was more like, “Oh, I missed the due date.” I'm like, “Okay, so since I missed a due date, then what I’m going to do now is to keep a calendar, and I’m just going to go ahead and write down all my assignments.” I always would check my calendar every single week. I would make sure my calendar actually matched up with the calendar in [the class]. You know, like I said, sometimes professors change things or maybe I didn't write the due date as I initially saw it. So I would basically just double-check everything every single time I logged on to Canvas. And I would actually check Canvas like twice a day.

There is a Hindi word, jugaad, that describes the phenomenon of finding the solution to a problem through improvisation or by using one’s intuition, ingenuity, and cleverness (Radjou et al., 2012). There is no English translation of the word. It is frequently referenced in business and management literature. There are no known studies of students using jugaad to help them gain self-directed learning skills to succeed in online classes. However, jugaad is reminiscent of the

examples of positive deviance in the nutrition literature. As described in Pascale et al. (2010), Vietnamese parents whose children were threatened by malnourishment decided to feed their children sweet potato greens and tiny crabs from the rice fields. No one told them to do that to nourish their children. In fact, those food items were considered taboo for children to consume. But the parents, desperate to succeed at providing sustenance for their children, improvised and found a nutritious food source for them. Perhaps the idea to feed the children those particular items just came to them like the idea for managing her time effectively just came to Renee. Alternatively, the parents may have tried and failed to feed their children other food items before finally finding the greens and crabs like Irene's trial and error method of procuring organizational skills. However the skills and effective resources were obtained, jugaad was at work for both sets of positive deviants.

Themes Generated from the Research Interviews: Strategies Used to Succeed

During the interviews, the students described several strategies they employed to succeed in their online courses. These included using time management and organizational skills to complete assignments, and not taking difficult courses online. Each of these strategies is discussed below.

Using Self-Directed Learning Skills to Complete Assignments

Studies have found a strong link between self-directed learning skills and online student success (Gray, 2016; Rovai, 2003; Salvo et al., 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Specifically, time management and organizational skills have been identified as requisite skills for online course success. Students in the current study used time management and organizational skills to help them spend time on task and complete their assignments to find success in their online coursework. Organizational skills included the ability to record assignment deadlines in a

planner or an electronic application to avoid missing points for work that was not submitted. Time management skills included the ability to determine the day and time that students would read, study, post to discussion boards, and otherwise engage with the course content, their peers in the class, and the instructor.

Using Time Management Skills to Complete Coursework

Lehman and Conceição (2014) conducted a study to investigate university students' strategies for staying motivated and persisting in online courses. Sixty-two percent of the students were undergraduates and 38% were graduate students. The students completed a survey that asked questions about the strategies that motivated them and influenced retention in their online courses. The authors found that the students used time management and organizational skills to help them complete online assignments and succeed in their online courses. Among the methods that students used to manage their time was to set their schedule based on the various life roles that they had as full-time students, full-time employees, and parents. The students scheduled time to work consistently on their assignments based on their other obligations. They also arranged their schedule so that they could take breaks from online work to spend time with their loved ones, and recreate and refresh themselves.

Students in the current study described time management experiences that are consistent with findings from the study conducted by Lehman and Conceição (2014). For example, Alice devised a schedule in which she set aside time for schoolwork, family duties, and time for herself.

> I needed to really make sure that I'm continuously working. I put myself on a schedule so that say Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I dedicate to homework. I would work Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Thursdays would be the days that I would set up doctor's

appointments for my boys. Saturday and Sunday I would allow myself to watch a movie or bake something or hangout with family or friends.

Lehman and Conceição (2014) also found that students spread out their course workload over a week or more so that they could pace themselves and allow for sufficient time to complete assignments by the deadline. The students I interviewed also structured their time so that they worked on assignments during a timeframe that was convenient for them, whether it was a specified time each day or a period of time in which they could concentrate and focus on their schoolwork. Michelle provided an example of how she managed her time to complete her online assignments. She did not have a stringent schedule for the exact time of day that she would work on assignments but, instead, worked during the time of day that was best for her. She advocated for spreading out assignments over the course of a week instead of trying to do everything all at once. Like Alice, Michelle also stressed the importance of taking breaks for self-care.

> Say for instance, my assignment is due on a Sunday of every week and I have two classes, right? Maybe three classes or something. All my assignments are due that Sunday. Depending on how many assignments I have, I pace myself and I give myself time in between. So say for instance, instead of working on a Monday, because Monday is very stressful for people, that's my off day. I'll get a break in and just enjoy something that I love doing. So I start working Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. I'll work maybe anytime throughout the day that's better for me. It's not a specific time. Whatever time is better for me. Say for instance, early in the morning is better for me, which usually is 'cause that's the most quiet time. So I'll give maybe an hour or two of my time in the morning, then I'll probably come back to it later on that afternoon.

Lehman and Conceição (2014) stated that the pacing method of establishing a rhythm of working on assignments regularly allows students to have more control over their lives as opposed to permitting their online classes to control their lives. In a similar manner, students in the Lehman and Conceição (2014) study managed their stress levels by completing coursework well in advance of the deadline to prevent the anxiety that procrastination breeds. Maria adopted this strategy and advises future online students to do the same.

> I would definitely tell them to work ahead. Like, if you know you have work due next week and you're taking more than one online class, just get it started so when that day comes, you either have it done or almost done, and you're not stressing as much.

In addition to managing their time based on their life roles and obligations, students in the Lehman and Conceição (2014) study managed their time according to assignment deadlines. The students often underestimated how long it would take them to complete assignments and had to overcome that obstacle. This was reflected in my interviews with Sarah, who utilized the deadlines given in course syllabi to shape how she would organize her time. She explained how she overcame the challenge of determining how much time it would take to complete various academic tasks.

> And one of the things that I was told was take everything one day at a time in the beginning. So I would, when I first got my schedule [syllabus], I was like, "Okay, I need to get this done this day, this done that day." When I had a day off, that day could go by so quick and everything that I planned to get done a week ahead of time would not get done. So I would take the time out, sit down the night before and say, "Okay, I have this much time tomorrow. Between this time and this time, I know that I can get this amount of things done." So it started out with me planning out the things that I knew I could get

done day by day, but also I had to take the time out to see how long does it generally take me to get these things done.

Another technique that students used to manage their time was to complete what they perceived to be easier or more difficult assignments first or last. Lehman and Conceição (2104) referred to this as one of several prioritizing strategies. In their study, students usually did what took the least amount of time first. Of the students I interviewed, some completed easier coursework first, while others prioritized the more difficult assignments. April completed easy assignments first because the more difficult assignments took more time to do and she was more motivated to do the easier assignments.

I'm never really motivated to do the work. I just know that it has to be done. So if things are easier than others, then I'm motivated to get those done quickly, but if I find that it's going to take more time, then I'm not motivated for that. But if it's easy, I'm motivated.

Maria had a different approach. She chose to complete the more difficult assignments first.

[The strategies] kind of just came to me, like they made the most sense to do the things that would take the longest or the hardest things first. That way when I did make it to stuff that was easier, I could just get it over and done with. I kind of prioritize it based off of what classes I'm struggling in the most to the least. Like if I'm struggling in one class more than another, I'm going to focus on that class 'cause it's going to take me longer to complete the assignments for that class than the one that's not as hard for me. I just like to do the harder stuff first. And so that way when I get done with that, all that's left is like the less time consuming or easier things and I know I can get it out of the way faster.

Sarah also chose to complete more difficult assignments first. They were difficult for her because they were not her favorite subjects.

> Sometimes we don't always do things that we're supposed to, when we are supposed to do it. So with the things that I felt I didn't want to do the most, which were some projects and classes that I didn't like…when it came down to science, I didn't like that much. So I would work on the things that I didn't want to do first.

Using Organizational Skills to Succeed

The tools that students in the Lehman and Conceição (2014) study used to keep track of assignment deadlines in their online classes included planners, calendars, and to-do lists. Students in the current study also made use of these tools. For them, time management and organizational skills were intertwined. Students used both skill sets to help them spend time on tasks to complete their coursework. Using a planner helped students manage their time. Mariah discussed how her use of a planner aided time management. She set daily assignment completion goals for herself to get the coursework done and also have some time for herself.

> I just basically put everything out on my planner. What I have to do today. "Okay, I'm going to get this done today, and once I'm done with that, the next day I'm going to get this done today." So I just basically set goals every day. So when I get home, I'm like, "Okay, I'm gonna shower, eat, and I'm going to get this assignment done, or I'm going to work a little bit on this assignment." Or I'll work on a large amount [of an] assignment so I can have the weekend, you know, to have free time.

April also discussed her method for staying organized using a calendar. "So I just write down all the assignments that are due. If I have a test due, I make sure I write it down. Writing things down in my calendar helps me stay on track." Using a more high-tech approach, Alex uses

her phone to remind her of coursework deadlines, as did students in the study conducted by Lehman and Conceição (2014). As Alex explained, "If you just jot down in the calendar or planner things you have to get done, everything will run smoothly for you. I keep a calendar. In my phone, I'll have reminders set for when something is due."

As stated previously, most of the students in this study developed time management and organizational skills on their own, through trial and error, after they realized that they were not progressing in their online coursework. Cindy was the exception. One of her first online instructors helped her develop the self-directed learning skills that she needed to succeed. The use of those skills to establish a solid plan to devote time to studying every day became one of her strategies for online course success. Her instructor taught her how to use a calendar to structure her time to complete assignments—the same method that the Lehman and Conceição (2014) students used.

> I forgot her name, but it's one of my first teachers there. She was my COM 101 instructor. She would always tell us, "You have to put education as your first priority. In order for you to be able to succeed, you have to study. In order for you to study, you have to have time. You have to make time. You have to get you a calendar." She actually had us make a calendar on the days we're going to study. We had to map out our whole day and make sure we add studying in there and I actually started using that strategy. I'll say, "Okay today I know I have to work, I have to come home, I might have to do laundry, then maybe I'll get in an hour or 30 minutes to study." It doesn't really matter how long you study, as long as you do something.

Not Taking "Hard" Classes Online

When students in the current study were asked about the challenges they experienced with online classes, they stated that sometimes they did not understand the course content because the discipline was one in which they felt less skilled. The students discussed a range of courses that they considered to be difficult or easy based on either their skill level in the discipline or their need to receive immediate answers to questions while reading instructional materials and learning the course content. Math and science were commonly named among the students as difficult courses, but so was psychology. To succeed in their online classes and achieve their educational goals at the college, the students developed a strategy of not taking the classes that they found "hard" or difficult, online. They learned to take hard classes in face-to-face formats so that the instructor was right there to answer questions. Alex explained why she feels it is better that she takes math classes face-to-face.

> I struggle in math. So I feel like me taking math online wouldn't be suitable for me to retain the information. I feel like I'll be better at passing the class if I actually went to class and learned the math 'cause I feel like certain things, like if you're not good at it, you shouldn't just take online. I feel like it would be easier if you did it in school and that way if you do need help, the teacher's there. You can hurry up and [get] help. The teacher can help you after class or before class. 'Cause sometimes like when you do [reach out] to teachers (in online classes), they don't really respond right away or it takes days and then the assignment has to be turned in. So it's like they basically didn't help you.

The literature regarding students choosing between online and face-to-face classes is consistent with these observations. Jaggars (2014) interviewed 47 Black and White students at two community colleges where they were enrolled in at least one online, high-demand

introductory course in such areas as English, math, and sociology. She examined the reasons that students had for choosing online rather than face-to-face sections of required courses. The students studied by Jaggars explained that when taking online classes, instructors were not present to immediately respond to their questions as they were in face-to-face classes. Therefore, they only took classes online that they considered "easy," meaning they could read the textbook and other instructional materials and teach themselves the content without needing to receive explicit instruction or ask the instructor several questions. The students chose to take the courses that they considered difficult in face-to-face formats on campus so that they could have easy access to the instructor.

Successful Black online learners in the current study agreed with this strategy, noting that, to an extent, online learning requires students to teach themselves. Therefore, they believed, students should be strong in the disciplines that they choose to take in the online environment. Mariah elaborated on the perspective.

> If you're just not strong in that area, just don't take it online because online classes are basically like self-taught or, you know, it just comes easy to you. And if you take those classes that you struggle with in person, then you can get help from the teacher or maybe one of your peers.

Summary: How Successful Black Students Experienced Online Courses

The African-American participants in this study experienced online classes as challenging due to the lack of instructor presence, the need to balance multiple responsibilities, and the need to develop advanced self-directed learning skills that had not been reinforced in their previous educational experiences. However, looking at the students' responses to the

challenges through the lens of positive deviance, it is clear that they are resourceful and inventive. They used the resources that were readily available to them to succeed.

When the students had difficulty understanding the content in their online classes, they turned to the Internet, using Google and YouTube to essentially bring the instruction to them that was missing due to a lack of instructor presence. Some students chose to reach out to instructors and wait for answers to their questions when they did not understand the course content.

Successful Black online learners experienced the same challenge as their peers in having to balance work, school, and family responsibilities simultaneously. Work and family demands have been noted as one of the main reasons that students enroll in online classes as they strive to fit school in with their other obligations. But managing so many responsibilities at once left students in the current study with little time to work on course assignments during the day. Despite their exhaustion, the students stayed up late into the night to complete coursework, uncovering grit as a resource, along with their commitment to provide for their families and their desire to achieve their educational and career goals. Grit has been documented as a kind of x-factor in the formula of success. In the current study, the positive deviants revealed that grit is a characteristic that they possessed, which enabled them to succeed.

Finally, having to develop advanced time management and organizational skills for online learning success could have been the study participants' undoing. However, using jugaad, also known as using intuition, the students taught themselves the skills they needed. They figured out, on their own, how to keep track of their assignments using planners and how to manage their time to complete assignments and meet deadlines. Then they used those skills to successfully complete their online courses. They also refrained from taking courses online that they considered difficult so they would be more likely to succeed in the online classes that they did

take. This, too, the students figured out on their own, once again demonstrating their ability to either find a way to succeed or make a way to succeed.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of this study was to learn how African-American community college online learners succeed. Using positive deviance as the conceptual framework, I sought to discover the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that successful African-American students held and practiced that led to their success online. The research questions guiding the study included:

1. What were the challenges that African-American community college online learners experienced as they pursued online coursework?
2. What resources were at the disposal of African-American community college online learners to help them overcome the challenges they experienced while taking online classes?
3. What strategies did African-American community college online learners employ to succeed in online courses?

This chapter summarizes key findings, identifies unanswered questions the findings leave us with, and suggests lines of further research. While the study investigated only a small number of students from a purposive sample, and conclusions cannot be made about the general population of Black collegians, the study findings do offer suggestions for how institutions could adopt practices to facilitate the success of Black online learners.

Challenges

Understanding Online Course Content

One of the most significant challenges the students often faced was difficulty understanding online course content. Students explained that there were a few factors that contributed to this challenge, the main one being a lack of instructor presence to answer their questions. This finding is consistent with the literature. Other Black online learners have experienced a lack of instructor presence (Salvo et al., 2017), and scholars have noted that

instructors being present in an online course to answer students' questions is the most important factor in helping students understand the material and succeed in the course (Jaggars et al., 2013b).

The students also stated that another reason they did not understand online course content was that the subject matter was one in which they felt academically unprepared. This finding is also consistent with the literature. Numerous scholars have documented that academic success often eludes academically underserved students because the inequities in their education left them without the academic skills necessary to earn passing grades (Cochran et al., 2013; Davidson, 2017; Moore et al., 2002; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). But half of the students in the study who tested into developmental education classes took them online and passed with a grade of "C" or better. In light of what scholars say about how difficult it is for students to pass developmental education classes online (Jaggars et al., 2013a), it is clear that students in the current study who accomplished this feat beat the odds.

Half of the developmental education students in the current study stated that they did not have more difficulty understanding the course content because of their lack of academic proficiency in the subject matter. Instead, these students pointed to the lack of instructor presence as the factor that made understanding online course content difficult for them. This finding offers promise for academically disadvantaged students. It suggests that their chances of being successful in online developmental education courses may increase with effective instructor presence, to answer their questions. In addition, students passing developmental courses online, despite the difficulty of achieving this feat as documented in the scholarly literature, suggests that these students may be positive deviants. They presumably had the same challenges and background as their peers but produced an atypically positive outcome. The positive deviants

accessed attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to overcome the lack of instructor presence in their online developmental education courses. They may have relied on internet resources to help them understand the course content or they may have reached out to instructors with their questions about the material. Whatever the resource of choice, the students found a way to accomplish their goal.

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

Secondary to the challenge of understanding course content was the students' struggle to manage work, school, and family responsibilities simultaneously. The students had a limited amount of time to devote to schoolwork given their other obligations, which threatened their ability to study and complete assignments. This challenge is well-documented in the literature on student attrition in online learning. Researchers have asserted that balancing multiple responsibilities often negatively impacts online course persistence (Moore et al., 2002; Müller, 2008; Rovai, 2003). Scholars also state that students with inadequate support systems, including family and friends who can help with childcare and other responsibilities, have higher rates of attrition in online classes (Lee & Choi, 2011). Many of the students in my study lacked these support systems but succeeded nonetheless. These successful Black online learners often borrowed hours from sleeping to stay up late at night to study and complete course assignments. It was the only way they could manage all of the demands on their time.

The spirit of positive deviance is potentially evident in this finding in that the students worked while exhausted to accomplish their goals. Much like the Vietnamese parents whose goal was to ensure that their children were well-nourished in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances to find nutrition, the successful Black online learners found a way or made a way to be successful. The Vietnamese parents found a way to feed their children when they gave

them food items that were considered taboo for children to eat (Pascale et al., 2010). The successful Black online learners found a way to complete their coursework while also working and taking care of their loved ones. They decided to pull all-nighters to study and submit assignments.

This notion of finding a way or making a way to be successful is not only aligned with positive deviance, it is also consistent with the African-American experience. This special ability to achieve goals is a trait that I often heard about while growing up, as my parents told stories about their journeys to success. As a 24-year-old divorced mother of three young children in Chicago in the 1960s, my mother returned home to Alabama to finish her high school education. She later entered college in Chicago and achieved her goals of upward economic and social mobility. She found a way to be successful. My father left Alabama for Chicago in January of 1960 in search of better job opportunities. He had four dollars in his pocket. He worked in a restaurant as a dishwasher until he was able to secure better employment. He later found a job that afforded him and his family a middle-class lifestyle. He found a way to be successful. After growing up hearing about the ability of Black people to survive and thrive, it is striking and awe-inspiring to see that ability and spirit in the current study's successful Black online students.

Developing More Advanced Self-Directed Learning Skills

The last challenge that students noted was that when they began taking online classes, they did not have the advanced time management and organizational skills necessary to successfully complete the courses. This finding is consistent with the research on self-directed learning skills among online students. Xu and Jaggars (2014) stated that not all novice online learners have the requisite self-directed learning skills to succeed. They also point out that students may need institutional support to build this skill set to increase the likelihood of success

in online courses. The challenge regarding self-directed learning skills represents a significant opportunity for institutions to be intentional about supporting first-time online students of color. This opportunity is discussed, at length, in the Recommendations section.

What Was Not a Challenge

I expected most of the students in the current study to express that they felt isolated from peers and instructors in their online classes. The notion that online learning breeds isolation is ubiquitous in the literature. Arroyo (2010) and Rovai (2007) contended that, for Black students whose cultural values include affect, cooperation, community and socialization, the online environment, with its signature physical separation of students from all participants, is especially isolating. However, feeling isolated was not a dominant theme raised by the students. A few of the students stated that they experienced isolation, but others expressed the opposite, stating that they felt engaged and connected to others in their online classes. There were certainly not enough students who discussed isolation as a challenge to make it a theme. That this group of students did not feel isolated in the online environment is a subject for further study.

Another unexpected finding was that most of the students in the current study did not experience the digital divide. Scholars attest that White students are more likely than Blacks to have reliable computer and broadband access at home as well as the educational technology skills needed to succeed in online learning (Moore, 2014; Perrin, 2017). However, only two of the successful Black online learners in my study were without broadband access at home for a brief period of time. None of the students lacked the educational technology skills necessary to navigate the LMS. Although the college mandated an online course module to teach students how to navigate the LMS, the students professed that they learned how to navigate the system

independently. One student likened the LMS to a social media platform that one would learn to use by clicking the various buttons and tabs to understand their functions.

For the two students who did briefly experience the digital divide, we see another example of these students finding a way to be successful. April and Sabrina used the computers at the college to complete online assignments until they could get broadband access at home. April would work a full day and then go to the college to use the computers instead of going home to her 3-year-old daughter. Sabrina completed assignments on her phone while traveling to and from the college on a bus that had wifi. She has a physical disability that makes walking difficult, yet she did what she had to do to complete her online course assignments. These women did not let the lack of technology deter them from persisting in accomplishing their goals. They made sacrifices to find a way to succeed.

Resources

Internet Sources

Most students in the current study turned to YouTube, Google, and other internet resources to view lectures, problem demonstrations, and other content that helped them better understand course material. Utilizing this resource addressed the lack of instructor presence and helped students get answers to their questions. The use of internet sources as instructional tools is a common practice among Black college students, according to Buzzetto-More (2015), who also explained that digital natives view internet technologies, preferably YouTube, as essential to the process of gathering information. Buzzetto-More asserted that these students learn best when using multi-media technology that stimulates both the auditory and visual centers of the brain and allows students to navigate through the content at their own pace. Students in the current

study validated the aforementioned scholarship with their experiences using YouTube for academic purposes.

It stands to reason that it would naturally occur to students in the current study to search for answers to their academic questions on the Internet. Most of the students are digital natives who grew up using the Internet. In this instance, finding a way to be successful was simply a matter of doing something that they had always done and engaging in a behavior that is common for most Black college students.

Instructors

Although most of the students relied on internet sources to help them better understand their online course content, some of them frequently reached out to their instructors with questions. This finding contradicts research on academic help-seeking among Black college students, which holds that, in general, this population avoids asking White instructors questions about the course content, fearing that this might confirm negative stereotypes of Black students as intellectually inferior (Wood, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015). The question remains as to why some of the students made the decision to approach their instructors with questions.

Grit

Grit, maintaining effort and interest over the years despite adversity, was the resource that students identified as helping them to overcome the challenge of having to balance multiple responsibilities including work, school, and family obligations. Many of the students worked full -time and had children, siblings, or other loved ones to care for at home after work. They were exhausted at the end of the day and had little time or energy to engage with online coursework. But their determination to achieve their goal of successfully completing their online classes empowered them to make time for their studies by staying up late at night to work on

assignments. As the PD framework aims to discover the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of positive deviants, grit emerged as one of the characteristics among this sample of Black community college online learners that led to their success.

Several examples of grit as a strategy for success emerged in my interviews. April repeatedly stayed up all night to complete assignments after working all day, attending on-campus classes, and taking care of her daughter. Cindy persisted to complete a laboratory science course online during a pandemic. Sabrina struggled with her own and her daughter's disabilities, yet still managed to resist the temptation to withdraw from her online classes, even when she had difficulty figuring out how to succeed in them. I am so proud of these students and so inspired by them. When I faced my own challenges in completing this study, I thought about how I wanted the students' stories to be documented. The scholarly world needs to know how strong these students are, how much they sacrificed, and what they experienced on the road to success.

The finding of grit contributing to online student success is consistent with the literature. Buzzetto-Hollywood et al. (2019) noted that the higher students score on the 12-item Grit Scale, the better their academic performance in online courses.

Academic Motivators

Another resource that helped the students in the current study overcome the challenge of balancing multiple responsibilities was a laser focus on what motivated them to succeed. Their motivators included a desire to complete their degree program, achieve their career goals, enhance economic mobility, support their children, serve as role models for family members, make family members proud of them, and serve their community.

The students' drive to conquer obstacles because of what they stood to gain is consistent with the extant literature regarding academic motivation in African-American students and

online learners. For example, Miles (2009) found that Black undergraduate women persevered to earn their degrees as a way of providing a better life for their children and demonstrating the importance of not giving up when challenges threaten to derail goal achievement. Mwangi et al. (2017) also found that family ties influence the academic motivations of Black collegians. They argue that when family members held high expectations, students pushed themselves to ensure that they always fulfilled their academic responsibilities so as not to disappoint their loved ones and to make them proud. Here we see another example of the spirit of the African-American community—the importance of family as an impellent power, making a major contribution to students' desire to accomplish their goals. In considering academic motivators as a resource among the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs held by the positive deviants in the current study, one must also consider the high regard students have for family members and for upholding their expectations.

Jugaad

Jugaad is a Hindi word that refers to the phenomenon of finding the solution to a problem through improvisation or by using one's intuition, ingenuity, and cleverness (Radjou et al., 2012). Jugaad is also an apt description of the resource that most of the students in the current study called upon when they discovered that they did not have the advanced self-directed learning skills needed to succeed in online learning. After missing assignment deadlines and, subsequently, losing points for not submitting coursework, the students, by what they called trial and error or intuition, taught themselves the requisite time management and organizational skills to succeed.

While in other instances previously described, the students found a way to be successful, here they *made* a way to be successful by creating something out of nothing or developing skills

where the instruction to do so did not exist. What the students did is reminiscent of the actions of another group of positive deviants, the Vietnamese parents who made a way to nourish their children by sitting with them while they ate so that they would not waste food (Pascale et al., 2010). No one told the parents to do that or gave them that idea. I can imagine that the idea just occurred to the parents. It was intuitive for them in the same way that it was intuitive for the students to use a planner to keep track of deadlines or to reduce stress by completing assignments well in advance of the deadlines. It may seem as though the students' actions were simply born out of common sense and, therefore, insignificant and not worth noting. However, the students' actions are incredibly significant. Their actions exemplify the heart of the positive deviant to find a way or make a way to achieve success. Their actions present evidence that contradicts the negative cultural stereotypes of African-American students. The positive deviants and their success reveal the truth that Black collegians are not lazy, "dumb," or "ignorant."

As I conclude the discussion about the resources that students used to overcome the challenges they experienced on the road to online course success, my mind travels back in time to when I first developed the research questions for this study. I assumed that instructors, tutors, or encouraging family members would be the key resources that would wrap themselves around students and provide the support and guidance they needed, leading to their success. But as I look at the data collected from the students and consider their testimonies about the resources they utilized to overcome challenges, it is clear that the students themselves—their grit, their discipline, their ability to stay motivated, their jugaad, their ability to find a way to succeed sometimes and make a way to succeed other times—were a prominent resource used to attain success.

Strategies

Once the students in the current study taught themselves how to schedule coursework into their busy schedules so that they would complete their online assignments and keep track of assignment deadlines, they used their newly heightened time management and organizational skills to help them spend the time on task necessary to succeed in online learning. Students managed their time by arranging their schedules around the various life roles they played as full-time students, full-time employees, and family caretakers. They also arranged their schedules so that they could take breaks and have time for self-care. Another time management technique was to spread out the course workload over a week or more so that they could pace themselves and allow sufficient time to complete assignments prior to the deadline. This technique kept students from feeling stressed and overwhelmed by the pressure to complete assignments in a hurry to meet deadlines. The students also used planners, calendars, and electronic devices and applications to record deadlines so that they would not miss them and lose the points they needed to earn a passing grade.

The last strategy that students exercised to achieve success was to avoid taking difficult classes online. The students explained that they considered some classes to be difficult, because understanding the content required explicit instruction and immediate answers to questions that arose as they read the course textbook and other instructional materials. Math and science were commonly labeled difficult courses. Other classes were considered easy because the students could understand the content without asking the instructor questions or needing to have the material explained in different terms. The students strategically took only the classes they considered to be easy online. Difficult classes were taken face-to-face so that students would

have immediate access to the instructor to answer their questions and provide additional assistance needed to help them understand the course content.

In a study that aimed to discover the uncommon attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that positive deviants employed to achieve success, I was surprised to find that the strategies they used to succeed were exceedingly common. For years, researchers have made it clear that successful online learners use time management and organizational skills to achieve their course completion goals (Gray, 2016; Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Rovai, 2003; Salvo et al., 2017; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Similarly, scholars have documented that students choose to enroll in face-to-face sections of classes over online sections based on whether they consider the classes to be easy or difficult (Jaggars, 2014).

What can be ascertained from this finding is that African-American community college students use some of the same strategies for success that White or other students use. However, the current study indicates that the distinction between African-American and other students might be that in addition to using common strategies to succeed, Black students may turn to their families as a source of motivation and teach themselves to develop the skills they lack to achieve their goals.

Questions Raised and Suggested Studies

Why Didn't Students Feel Isolated?

The majority of students in the current study did not feel isolated in the online environment despite the literature contending that most Black students do experience isolation (Arroyo, 2010; Rovai, 2007). Why didn't most in this group of Black students feel isolated? Perhaps the majority of the students did not feel isolated because they were juggling multiple responsibilities and were so focused on passing their classes that they did not have the bandwidth

to attend to feelings of isolation. Most may not have been seeking a connection with others, as one of the students, Alice, stated. She did not talk to her classmates in face-to-face classes, so she was not concerned about experiencing a sense of community in the online environment either. Alice worked part-time, was enrolled in classes full-time, and had to care for twin toddlers while pursuing her studies. She serves as a good representative of the students regarding how much time they did not have to focus on their needs or interest in connecting with others in the online environment. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) comes to mind—the students were too engrossed with surviving (fulfilling the safety or stability need to manage all of their responsibilities and pass their classes to achieve job security and economic mobility) to engage in love and belonging (seeking community and connecting with others).

One way to explore the question of isolation in the online environment would be to interview adult online students about the social connections that support them such as relationships with significant others, mentors, family members, and co-workers. Perhaps these connections give the students a sense of community and ward off isolation. Kember (1999) found that family members, friends, classmates, and co-workers helped adult students integrate part-time study into their work and family responsibilities. Connections with these individuals also encouraged them and helped them persist until completion of their credentials. Further study could help determine whether these connections prevent students from feeling isolated.

Why Didn't Students Experience the Digital Divide?

Most of the students had reliable computers and internet access at home. All the students had the educational technology skills needed to navigate the LMS. These findings evoke one major question: While the literature suggests that African-American students may be more likely than White students to be on the wrong end of the digital divide, how did the students I

interviewed manage to have the requisite technical resources and skills? Were the digital natives in the study able to navigate the LMS because they grew up with computers? Did the mandatory online module, geared toward teaching them how to navigate the LMS, help the students more than they realized? An interview study asking students the aforementioned questions could be one approach to conducting further investigation.

Why Did Students Engage in Academic Help-Seeking?

Some of the students actively sought help from their instructors to answer questions about the course content so that they could better understand the material. But their actions were inconsistent with the literature that claims that many African-American collegians do not engage in academic help-seeking, fearing that they will confirm negative stereotypes of Black students being intellectually inferior (Wood, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Why, then, did students in the current study approach their instructors with questions about the material in their online courses? Was it out of desperation because the students could not find answers to their questions on YouTube or Google? Was it because the professors did a good job of making themselves readily available for student questions? Was it because those particular students usually engage in academic help-seeking for all of their classes whether online or face-to-face as a success strategy? Thompson et al. (2019) may have an answer. The researchers found that Black students felt more comfortable seeking help from professors for academic assistance when the students had a sense of belonging at the institution. The researchers affirmed that a sense of belonging could be engendered when students have supportive experiences with faculty and other institutional representatives. Perhaps the students who engaged in academic help-seeking had positive experiences with members of the institution prior to taking online classes, which led them to feel comfortable asking questions about their online course content.

One way to approach this question through a research study would be to interview Black community college online learners and ask them whether they regularly engage in academic help-seeking, what led them to engage or to refrain from engaging, and whether they are concerned about confirming negative stereotypes of African-American students. I would also be curious to learn about the outcome of their help-seeking, whether they received the help they needed and whether the help-seeking was a positive experience for the students. In addition, it would be worth asking whether the ethnicity of the instructor affected the likelihood of the student engaging in help-seeking and whether the instructor's ethnicity impacted the outcome or quality of the help-seeking experience according to the students.

Is There a Correlation Between Grit and Jugaad?

What is the difference between grit and jugaad? One is determination and the other is intuition. Both are key to success. The students' ability to find a way and make a way to succeed is essentially grit and jugaad combined. The students find a way by making use of what exists and is available to them, such as internet resources to answer questions in the absence of an instructor. They make a way to succeed by creating something where nothing exists, as they did when they taught themselves self-directed learning skills.

Do gritty online learners also have jugaad? An interesting study would be to investigate whether students who demonstrated jugaad had high scores on the Grit Scale and earned high grades in online courses. Since jugaad is frequently referenced in business and management literature, I would find it intriguing to see the concept studied and applied in the context of online learning. It would also be interesting to find out if there is any evidence that jugaad is correlated with online learning success in the way that scholars have found that grit is correlated with online learning success. In addition, Buzetto-Hollywood et al. (2019) explained that the literature

investigating grit's contribution to online learning student success is not abundant and in its infancy. The author also explained that there is a dearth of literature examining grit and online student performance among Black collegians. A study combining grit, jugaad, and African-American online student success would be a valuable contribution to the extant literature on these topics.

Other Suggested Studies

The students in the current study did not identify racism in the virtual classroom as a challenge that they experienced. However, it would be interesting to explore whether other successful Black online learners experienced racism. Scholars who have investigated the experiences of community college students of color in the online environment have questioned whether asynchronous online classes offer protection from perceived stereotypes as students' racial identities may be less salient online. Palacios and Wood (2016) refer to this phenomenon of student identities being less apparent to online course faculty as the *virtual veil*. The authors state that the virtual veil may facilitate student engagement with faculty, students, and course material, as racial stereotypes that erode a sense of belonging may not be at the forefront.

Other useful studies include ones that mimic the current study's research design but investigate how Black community college online learners succeeded in other contexts such as in "hard" classes, STEM programs, and developmental education courses. Harper (2012) asserts that more anti-deficit research is needed because these studies provide a counter-narrative to the deficit-oriented studies which proliferate negative stereotypes about Black collegians. I concur. In addition to providing insight regarding how Black collegians succeed, these studies could also inform community college practices around improving success rates for this population.

Recommendations

There are some practices that community colleges can implement to support African-American online learners and improve the likelihood of course success and, ultimately, completion of their educational credentials. My recommendations will include what institutions can do to support students before they register for online classes and while they are enrolled in the classes. I will also include policy recommendations that call for the federal government to contribute to helping this student population complete college.

Offer Pre-registration Advising to First-Time Online Learners

One of the strategies that the successful Black online learners employed was to avoid taking courses that they considered difficult online. Community colleges should offer advising to first-time online learners to educate them about the nature of online learning, that it requires a degree of independent learning, and students should therefore consider taking classes online that would not require the presence of the instructor face-to-face for several hours each week for them to achieve the learning outcomes. Without advising, new online students would not be privy to this important success strategy and would be apt to enroll in an online course that they might find difficult.

Other information could be shared during a pre-registration advising session, such as the need for a reliable computer and internet access at home. Advisors should inform students about the resources that the college might offer for students to own or borrow a computer as well as opportunities to acquire affordable internet service from broadband providers. In addition, students should be forewarned about the challenges that they will conceivably face as online learners, such as the struggle to find enough time to devote to their studies while balancing multiple responsibilities, the need to develop self-directed learning skills, and the lack of an

immediate response from instructors about questions they have about course content. Helping students understand what they sign up for when they enroll in an online class will empower them to make an informed decision about what online classes to take, if any, and it would give them the tools they need to prepare to be successful online learners.

Require Professional Development Regarding Instructor Presence

Jaggars et al. (2013b) made it clear that instructors being present in an online course to answer students' questions is the most important factor in helping students master the material and earn high grades in the course. When instructors offer live video and audio chats, or live lectures so that students have an opportunity to ask questions and engage with the instructor and the course content, the probability of student success increases significantly.

Community colleges must require that instructors teaching online courses participate in a high-quality professional development experience each year that educates them about how to establish a strong instructor presence in the online environment. Institutions should engage faculty members who excel at being present in their online courses to create meaningful continuing education events that demonstrate the techniques and technology that can be used to help their faculty colleagues create an effective instructor presence online. Institutions must also devise a system to hold instructors accountable for implementing the tools that they acquire in their online courses to improve student success.

Ask Instructors to Teach Advanced Self-Directed Learning Skills

The successful Black online learners were taken aback by the realization that they would have to develop advanced self-directed learning skills to achieve success in their online courses. The students did not anticipate having to develop these skills because they are not needed in the

same way for face-to-face classes. Almost all of the students taught themselves the skills they needed, but this would conceivably be a difficult task for a majority of new online learners.

Xu and Jaggars (2014) offered that students may need institutional support in building self-directed learning skills in order to succeed in online courses. The authors state that not all students possess strong self-directed learning skills when they first enroll in online courses, but their instructors expect the students to have those skills and believe that it should not be their responsibility to help students develop those skills. However, Cindy, the one student in the study whose professor taught the class how to develop self-directed learning skills, provided an example of how these skills can be acquired in an online class and how students go on to use them as a strategy for success.

Rovai (2003) contended that self-directed learning skills are integral to online student success and that students who lack those specialized skills are destined to face attrition. Community colleges should offer professional development to online instructors to teach them how to help students develop self-directed learning skills in their class. Teaching students to develop the skill set does not have to consume an inordinate amount of the instructor's time. The task could be accomplished quickly and efficiently. The return on the investment in time would make a tremendous contribution to student success.

Hire Positive Deviants as Online Retention Specialists

This recommendation is in keeping with the tenet of positive deviance that involves the positive deviants educating their peers about how to attain success. When researchers discovered that the Vietnamese parents of well-nourished children used a set of resources and strategies to ensure that their children received proper nourishment, the researchers brought the positive

deviants and their peers together so that the positive deviants could teach their peers how to nourish their children (Pascale et al., 2010).

My recommendation to community colleges is to identify the positive deviants at the institution, train them so that they are well versed in the resources the college offers to retain online learners so that they can share those resources with their peers, and pay positive deviants to offer their expertise to their peers about achieving success in online learning. Positive deviants will have credibility with their peers because the positive deviants have been through what their peers are going through. The positive deviants will be able to tell other students how to manage multiple responsibilities, how to deal with a lack of teacher presence, etc. They will be more effective at retaining students than professionals hired to serve in that role because of the ways in which the students and the positive deviants will be able to relate to each other.

Make College Affordable for Economically Disadvantaged Students

While there is much that community colleges can do to improve the likelihood of course success and college completion for the population under study, the federal government should also participate in this effort by making a community college education more affordable. The students in this study were from low-income backgrounds. Most of them worked to be able to support themselves and their families and pay for college. They struggled to balance work with school and family responsibilities. If college were more affordable, students would be able to work less and balance school and home obligations with greater ease. They could spend more time focusing on their studies if they spent less time working. I recommend that the federal government make college more affordable for economically disadvantaged students by offering a tuition-free community college program and increasing the maximum Pell grant award so that it covers a larger portion of the cost of education.

Mettler (2014) explains that the Pell grant, established in 1972 for the explicit purpose of funding college attendance for low-income students, has not kept pace with rising tuition costs. She states that the Pell grant is no longer effective in making college affordable for the population it was intended to serve. The author points out that in the 1970s, the value of the maximum Pell grant award covered 80 percent of college tuition, fees, and room and board at a four-year public university. In 2013, the maximum Pell grant covered only 31 percent of college costs at a public university. Goldrick-Rab and Kendall (2014) add that the Pell grant is only slightly more effective at community colleges. They state that in 2013, the maximum Pell grant covered only 60 percent of college costs, where those costs were covered entirely in the 1970s.

Conclusion

This anti-deficit study elucidated the strengths and assets of successful African-American community college online learners. There is nothing wrong with these students. They are not lazy, unmotivated, or intellectually inferior. On the contrary, they work late into the night to complete assignments, they are motivated by their goals, and they possess an intelligence that is characterized by their ability to find a way or make a way to be successful in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

This study also brought to light the ways in which community colleges produce inequitable outcomes for African-American online learners. Our institutions may not prepare one of our most disadvantaged populations to make an informed decision about enrolling in classes delivered in a decidedly more difficult modality. Our instructors may not be present in the online environment in a way that is effective. They may also be of the opinion that it is not their responsibility to teach students how to develop a skill set, the absence of which will lead to failure or attrition. Colleges may not offer the support system of knowledgeable individuals who

have been where students are and can help lead them to success. All of our deficits and our insistence on focusing instead on Black students' deficits is producing low grades, failure, attrition, and lower graduation rates—all inequitable outcomes for our African-American online learners.

My final recommendation is for community colleges to think about how our institutions can shift from deficit thinking to equity thinking to produce equitable outcomes for African-American online learners. Instead of blaming these students for the inequitable outcomes that our institutions produce, we should consider how we can modify our policies and practices to redress the inequities that our African-American students experience in academic achievement, online course performance, persistence, and ultimately in graduation and completion rates.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The research questions guiding the study include:

1. What were the challenges that African-American community college online learners experienced as they pursued online coursework?
2. What resources were at the disposal of African-American community college online learners to help them overcome the challenges they experienced while taking online classes?
3. What strategies did African-American community college online learners employ to help them succeed?

The following questions will be posed to study participants during interviews:

Interview Questions	**Corresponding Research Question**
Please tell me a little about yourself. How old are you? Why did you decide to attend a community college? What are your educational goals? What are your career goals?	
Why did you decide to take an online class? Were the online classes in which you earned a grade of "C" or better the first online classes you had ever taken or did you have previous experience taking online classes?	1, 2
Did you have any preparation for taking an online course such as a new online student orientation?	1, 2
How would you describe your access to technology at home? Did you have access to the internet and a reliable computer at home? How would you describe your educational technology skills and your ability to navigate the college's learning management system?	1, 2
Tell me about your experience in the first online course you took in which you earned a grade of "C" or better. What was it like? What challenges did you experience? Did you have challenges related to your access to technology or your technology skills? Did you have challenges related to understanding the course content? Did you have challenges with the online format in terms of feeling isolated from the instructor or your peers?	1, 2
How did you overcome the challenges that you experienced? What strategies did you use to achieve success in online classes? What resources helped you succeed? What would you tell other students like you to do or to consider before they take an online class?	2, 3

Before I contacted you, were you aware that earning grades of "C" or better in online classes is something that most of your peers have not been able to accomplish? Why do you think that most of your peers were not able to accomplish what you accomplished?	3